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ABSTRACT

This document consists of one module extracted from a six-module larger work. Module 3 consists of seven articles on developing and offering student self-help support groups. Article titles and authors are as follows: (1) "Youth Engaged in Self-Help: A Guide for Starting Youth Self-Help Groups" (Mary K. Parkinson, Nancy Sax); (2) "Introducing and Tapping Self-Help Mutual Aid Resources" (Catherine J. Paskert, Edward J. Madara); (3) "Community Post-Tornado Support Groups: Conceptual Issues and Personal Themes" (Thomas E. Long, Wayne C. Richard); (4) "Coping with Desert Storm: Ideas for Starting and Running a Self-Help Support Group" (Joal Fischer); (5) "Desert Storm: Hints for Happy Homecomings" (Joal Fischer, Deborah Langsam); (6) "Self-Help--And How We Teach Tomorrow" (Edward J. Madara); and (7) "When Someone's Away: An Ongoing Support Group for Students in Grades 7-12 with Deployed Parents and Friends" (Marlene L. Bowling, Carolyn S. Donges, Barbara Stock Nielsen). (ABL)

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# DEVELOPING AND OFFERING STUDENT SELF-HELP SUPPORT GROUPS

Module 3 of

"Developing Support Groups for Students: Helping Students Cope with Crises."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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CG 023 945



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# MODULE 3

# DEVELOPING AND OFFERING STUDENT SELF-HELP SUPPORT GROUPS

**Objectives**

1. **Analyze the rationale for the use of self-help support groups.**
2. **Identify reasons for the growing popularity of self-help support groups.**
3. **Describe major characteristics of self-help support groups.**
4. **Discuss student benefits/outcomes from participation in self-help support groups.**
5. **Provide guidelines for self-help support group organization and operation.**
6. **Present illustrations of the functioning of self-help support groups with differing goals and membership.**

## Introduction

Recent crises and catastrophies such as Desert Storm, the Carolina tornadoes and calamities resulting from airplane and bus accidents have affirmed the power and utility of self-help support groups. Variously called mutual and self-help (MASH), or just "self-help support groups," five reasons are advanced here for their growing popularity and apparent effectiveness.

1. *Erosion of traditional sources of support* such as family, close neighborhood ties and the church have made it necessary for people to look elsewhere for support. Even where the traditional sources of support are present and functioning, they still may be inadequate for young people in a time of crisis. Frequently, the adult sources of support may themselves have been so involved in the crisis, e.g., earthquake or Desert Storm, that they are unable physically to be helpful, or they have been so affected by the calamity they are unable to respond adequately with the necessary and appropriate emotional help.

2. *An emphasis on the mutual and self-help features rather than a dependence upon the expensive and often difficult to obtain professional clinicians.* The self-help and mutual aid orientation of the support group minimizes the stigma associated with seeking professional psychological help and minimizes delays brought about by seeking the needed funding and professional help. The usual support group operates on a shoestring and by the very nature of its functioning appears to be more like a rap group than group therapy. This encourages participation by even those who are resistant to stating publicly that they need help.

3. *The clear image of being action oriented.* A frequent criticism of disaster relief efforts is that it

takes so long to get them up and functioning. When responding to a crisis doing *something* is almost always better than doing nothing. Action is antidote! Support groups can be formed quickly and provide members with a real sense that they are receiving support and help. In a school situation, it is particularly important that students not be allowed to "free float" while elaborate structures are formed. Support groups can do it!

4. *Self-help support groups focus on the immediate crisis.* The evidence suggests that persons who are experiencing a particular crisis respond most favorably to groups formed to confront that crisis rather than relying upon existing sources of help and support however well these services are delivered. The group formed to confront a specific crisis acknowledges for people the importance and gravity of what they have experienced.

5. *Bringing together people who have experienced the same crisis.* Support group members report a strong preference for group membership limited to people who have had similar experiences. Obviously students not in the same school or even the same grade level as a student who died in an accident would not be included in a support group formed in response to that crisis.

## Major Characteristics of Support Groups

By one estimate there are over 100,000 active self-help groups functioning in the U.S. that reach 2.5 to 5 million people. Despite the considerable variation in purpose and function that exists between the groups, almost all self-help groups are characterized by these major features:

1. *Peer focused.* Self-help groups function best when they are composed of students who share common problems and are experiencing similar crises and stresses. One of the more noteable characteristics of self-help groups is that participants can share common experiences which bind the groups together and facilitate communication between members.

2. *Targeted towards providing mutual aid.* The sharing of experiences and the expression of personal feelings and needs enables the group to provide a supportive atmosphere that impacts upon all members and leads to specific help and assistance being given to individuals in the group.

3. *Run by the members.* In contrast to group counseling or therapy groups, self-help groups are run by the members with consensual leadership rather than by a professional leader. The "rap like" atmosphere makes participation easy and members typically report being able to both give and receive information and suggestions in the group.

4. *Voluntary and nonprofit.* An important feature of self-help groups is that membership is voluntary and everyone feels free to come and go as they please and there are only minimal financial costs. Because they are non-profit, self-help groups are usually able to obtain space and materials at minimal cost.

## Benefits to Student Participation in Self-Help Support Groups

A critical question for any school to answer that is trying to decide whether to introduce support groups for their student body is: "What benefits accrue to both the students and the school?" The very existence of self-help groups, and the increasing number of participants involved in them as well as an expanding list of topics covered by them, speaks to their worth to those most impacted by them—the student participants.

Though clearcut empirical evidence regarding self-help group participant outcomes is sparse, a considerable body of "testimonial" evidence exists regarding the worth of the groups to the student participant. Frequently cited beneficial outcomes include the following:

### *1. Sense of Belonging*

A frequently expressed benefit is the very real feeling of belonging the participants gain. They become a member of a group that cares about them and what they have to say. No matter how severe the crisis they have experienced, the sense of belonging they gain from membership in a self-help support group offers them the confidence, ability and maturation to move on.

### *2. Problem Solving*

A common topic of discussion in the group is how to resolve this or that problem. Ideas and proposed actions and solutions are presented by different students and critiqued by the group members. Typically, the group works for consensus rather than a majority vote on any actions it takes. Of particular use to each student is the opportunity to present their "story" on what has happened to them and how they are coping. Other members of the group react to the presenter's perception of her/his problem and review with the presenter the problem-solving approach they are using. Through this approach, each group member is assisted in dealing with his/her problem as well as gaining increased problem-solving skills.

### *3. Values Clarification*

The group provides an excellent opportunity for each participant to consider the values they want to live by. For the first time in their lives many group members go through a process of examining the values that have been implicit in their behavior. This examination may lead them to make conscious choices about how they want to live.

### *4. Communication Skill Development*

Support group participation can be most helpful to students in developing communication skills—both those with a high personal reference content, e.g., "The war has really gotten to me; I can't think about anything else" to more generic, problem-focused content, e.g., "By making participation available by grade level we can avoid the problems." It is typically an excellent supportive climate for assisting young and old to develop greater skill in general communication as well as highly specific self-disclosure. Communication within a group is therapeutic because it provides the communicator with a means to gain a measure of relief by giving expression to worries and anxieties. It also helps the communicator to gain confidence in his or her ability to express personal feelings in front of a group.

### *5. New Found Helper Skills*

An important and inadequately acknowledged outcome of support group participation is the acquisition of greater skill and confidence by the participant in the use of "helper therapy" in responding to other members of the group. These helper "skills" are in reality double-edged benefits—they lead the helper to be more confident in assisting others in the group and they also increase the helper's sense of personal worth because they experience directly the appreciation of others for the help they have extended to other members of the group.

### *6. The Development of Change Agent Skills*

Support members who are grappling with their immediate personal problems find it is an easy transition to larger school and community problems. The question they may confront is what they can do individually or as a member of a change advocate group to help the school/community be more proactive towards problems and crises by planning for them in advance of their occurrence. This preplanning is not only frequently rewarding to the participants—and personally empowering!—but helpful to the school/community in developing the resources which will render future crises less severe in their impact on students, school staff, and adults in the community. Having coped successfully with past challenges can lead support group participants to feel sufficiently empowered to use their new-found change agent skills to tackle other school/community problems.

### *7. Acquiring Investigative Skills*

Through the suggestion of a group adult advisor or a knowledgeable group member an early focus of the group might be on researching the problem or topic. What have others done in a similar crisis, e.g., "The last time people experienced an earthquake, what steps helped them to deal with the after effects?"

Students who have previously used ERIC to do research for class papers can use their search skills to find relevant resources in ERIC which will help them avoid re-inventing the wheel or making unnecessary mistakes.

### *8. Increased Feelings of Self-Esteem*

Participation in the support group has been observed to not only help persons cope with immediate fears and crises but to develop an enhanced self-esteem based on the personal insights and new skills which they have acquired as a result of group participation. Confidence grows as they experience greater capacity to cope with previous fears and anxieties that often appeared overwhelming. Also, this new ability to cope with the problems that motivated them to join the group in the first place leads to a general sense of "I can do it" and hence, to grappling with problems they may have previously ignored or avoided.

## The Usefulness of Student Self-Help Support Groups

A review of the resources to follow will likely convince the user, as it has the writers, that the use of student self-help support groups offers much to a school. They have much to gain and little to lose by introducing them. How well they are designed and how skillfully they are introduced will, however, play an important part in determining how successful they become.

Six judiciously selected resources are included in the module to provide specific help to individuals and schools in developing student self-help support groups. They offer good examples and approaches for installing different kinds of support groups. Not all of the resources were developed especially for students but they are included here because they provide useful ideas and illustrations of effectively functioning programs which can be tailored to meet the needs of individual schools.

The materials in this section should be utilized in conjunction with personal inquiries to the list of resource centers in Module 6. By first reviewing the materials presented in this module a user will be better prepared to address specific questions and requests to the resource centers whose activities are closest to their areas of interest.

# Youth Engaged in Self-Help

## A Guide for Starting Youth Self-Help Groups

**Mary Kay Parkinson and Nancy Sax**

### Preface

About five years ago at a meeting of a self-help group for Retinitis Pigmentosa (a debilitating eye condition), I was approached by a 12-year-old boy and his parents. The boy had the condition and was becoming visually impaired. He was being excluded from many activities of youth organizations to which he belonged and he very much wanted to know if there was any self-help group or network that he could join. Unfortunately, at that time, there wasn't. Fortunately, since then, one organized by the R. P. Foundation has been started.

Over the last several years we have seen an increase in mutual aid self-help groups for youth. Similar to the way in which Alanon and Gamanon started Alateen and Gamateen, other national self-help groups, like Parents Anonymous and Emotions Anonymous, have started youth group counterparts with members of the adult groups often helping to develop and facilitate the youth groups.

Local one-of-a-kind self-help organizations have also started groups for youth. At one conference several years ago, for example, we arranged for representatives of several different adult bereavement groups to speak at one panel. It was the first time that they had ever come together and discussed their mutual needs and activities, and a major topic of their discussion was the need for, but lack of, youth groups for bereavement. They reached the conclusion that adults were so emotionally overwhelmed at the time of their loss, that no attention was being given to how youth were coping with their loss. As a result of this discussion, one of the groups did indeed start a group for youth who have suffered the loss of a parent. Since then, local schools, churches, and community agencies have also helped to develop groups, not only for bereavement, but for a wide variety of other problems.

There are other needs that youth self-help groups can address, and work in developing and maintaining these types of groups is still in its infancy. Through this first manual, we hope to provide you with some general ideas and guidelines, as well as a few models.

We are grateful to the pioneering groups who have shared with us their experience and materials. Nancy Sax and Mary Kay Parkinson, both full-time VISTA volunteers at the Self-Help Clearinghouse, spent many hours pulling together this material and interviewing those who are working with the groups. We wish to thank VISTA and ACTION for making their placement and work at the Clearinghouse possible. We are especially grateful to the Pew Memorial Trust for their generous grant which has made this manual possible. Finally, we express appreciation to Esther Foster, Anne Mahoney, Ken

Maton, and Barbara White for their hard work in assisting with the development of the manual.

Edward J. Madara
Clearinghouse Director

## An Introduction to the Youth Manual

In the fast-moving, mobile society of the late Twentieth Century, more and more people of all ages have turned to self-help groups for the support they need in facing life's problems. Life can be full of trials, but some of us face problems that change our lives, whether chronic disease, divorce, drug addictions, the death of a loved one or any others.

Mutual aid self-help occurs when people with a given problem or life situation meet together to share support and advice, and most importantly to let each other know that they are not alone in facing the difficulty. Mutual aid self-help has been practiced since families first existed, because as social beings we all need to be accepted, cared for and emotionally supported, and consequently we turn to each other for help.

Young people can have problems as disturbing to them as those affecting adults. They often feel even more trapped and isolated since they are much more vulnerable to peer pressure and the fear of "sticking out." Lack of experience in dealing with problems can further hamper their problem-solving efforts, and the lack of life experience and perspective often causes teens to blow things out of proportion. A self-help group—whether for general rapping or for youth dealing with a specific problem—can be an extremely useful resource, a way in which youths can begin solving their own problems.

This manual has been written to help you, the interested youth or involved adult, to start a self-help group for youth, where mountains become molehills and everyone can benefit from each other's shared concern. The text of the manual has been written in chapters ranging from the more general to the most specific. We hope that all parts will be useful and can be read consecutively like a roadmap. However, you might want to jump to an area of interest to you and should feel quite free to do so. Youth might be most interested in knowing what can be gained from a self-help group, the particulars of setting one up and how to maintain ownership. Adults may be more interested in their role, different formats and planning for future meetings. Professionals, on the other hand, may find the overall picture most interesting, and want to read of various youth groups and basic helping skills.

For all, it is most important to *use* the information in this manual; the need for youth groups is great, as are the possible benefits to be gained by the members. So go ahead!

## I. Self-Help Groups for Youth: What They Are

People with problems often feel alone and overcome as a rushed society continues on its way. This phenomenon can cause distressing events to take on mammoth proportions. The self-help group can be understood not only as an attempt to deal with this but also as a general response to increased alienation in our world. Moreover, the self-help movement may represent a growing societal desire for more personal control in managing our own physical and mental health, a role often ascribed solely to "experts." This model is particularly relevant to youth as they struggle with issues of independence and control. It offers the opportunity for self-empowerment within a supportive environment of peers. While the oldest self-help organization, Alcoholics Anonymous, recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, hundreds of other types of groups have also come into being over the last several years. These include groups for physical health problems, women's issues, addictions, bereavement, parenting and a whole host of mental health problems from anorexia and child abuse to autism and agoraphobia.

Three functions make these groups a dynamic and vital aid to their members: (1) they provide a strong social support for those who want to exchange assistance and comfort; (2) they encourage the education of group members and interested persons in related issues; (3) in some cases they can serve to facilitate the development of advocacy efforts at local, state and national levels. The New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse has in its information and referral

files a listing of over 3,200 self-help groups that meet in New Jersey and 270 national or model groups. The positive response received from these is continuous, confirming that self-help is already an encouraging example of how people can help themselves by helping each other.

Self-help groups, by definition and function, are composed of people who share a common life situation, problem or handicap and who exchange support and information for their mutual benefit. They draw on members' experiential knowledge, are focused on members' genuine needs, involve no fees and are voluntary. Based on these guidelines almost any problem area in which an adult self-help group exists can be addressed by a self-help group for youth.

The following are youth self-help groups which already exist in New Jersey (unless noted otherwise):

### Addictions/Dependencies

- Alcoholics Anonymous—young peoples' groups
- Alateen—for teenagers with an alcoholic parent
- Gam-a-teen—for teenagers with a gambling family member
- Naranon—for families of a narcotic abuser
- Overeaters Anonymous—teen groups

### Bereavement/Death

- Alice Henderson Children's Groups—for children (7–18) of parents who have or have died of cancer
- Bereavement Groups for Children (5–11) and Adolescents (12–18) (Essex County)
- Compassionate Friends—for children who have lost a sibling
- Jamie Schuman Center—teen groups, loss of all kinds
- Project Support—periodic group for grieving teens (14–18)

### Health/Disabilities

- Amputation—P.A.C.T. (Parents of Amputee Children Together) groups for youthful amputees as well as their parents
- Teen Group for Adolescent Cancer Patients (Union County)
- Candlelighters—for siblings of children with cancer
- A.D.A.P.T.(A Diabetic's A Person Too)—diabetics under 17
- Juvenile Diabetes Association—includes teen groups
- Pediatric Diabetes Group—for children and adolescents
- Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey—includes teen groups
- Association for Children and Adults With Learning Disabilities
- The Center for Attitudinal Healing—national pen pal/phone pal program for children with life-threatening illnesses (California)
- Young Fighters—for kids with major illness (New York City)
- Scoliosis Society of New Jersey—includes youth groups
- We Care Youth Group of the Speak Easy Foundation—for youth who stutter

### Mental Health

- Anorexia Nervosa/Bulimia
- Abused Kids—Parents Anonymous-sponsored groups
- Kids Anonymous—for children from stressful family environments (Illinois)
- Teens Together—for youth with a problematic relationship with their parents (Virginia)
- Daughters and Sons United—Parents United-sponsored groups for abused children and teens and their siblings
- Youth Emotions Anonymous—E.A. for kids (13-19) (Minnesota)
- SIBS—Siblings of the Mentally Retarded (Texas)

### Divorce/Single Parent

- Children of Separation and Divorce
- International Youth Council (IYC)—Parents Without Partners—sponsored group for single-parent kids
- Youth Divorce Support Group

- Sisterhood of Single Black Mothers—older single mothers help teen mothers (New York City)
- Early Single Parenting Project for pregnant teens (Calif.)

### Youth/Students

- Network—high school students lead positive "peer pressure" groups in middle schools (Burlington County)
- Teenage Rap Group (Passaic County)
- Rap Room—school drop-in rap group (New York City)
- Rap Group—YMCA-sponsored teen rap group (New York City)
- S.A.D.D.—Students Against Driving Drunk

### Other

- Families of Homicide Victims Support Group—for siblings of homicide victims (New York)
- Gay and Lesbian Youth of New York (New York City)
- Your Turf—gay youth group (Connecticut)
- Gay Youth Alliance (California)
- Foster Parents Association—for foster parents and kids

These are merely examples of youth groups that have already been formed in the burgeoning self-help field. Obviously the potential exists for others in a great many of the areas in which adult self-help groups exist. Although adolescents often do feel comfortable in adult groups—as one Overeaters Anonymous member has said, "They're just like us"—the additional benefits of peer support and mutual aid can make youth self-help groups especially rewarding for the young people.

Many claim that what young people need most is just a "safe" place in which to talk about their problems and concerns. Rap groups can fill this need. Youth themselves often deny specific problems or stressful life circumstances and would prefer a general discussion group. For example, someone who agrees to attend a group for kids of separated or divorced families may feel that such attendance would be a public announcement of their family's troubles with the implication that the kids are also troubled. Attending a rap group just indicates that a young person wants to talk with other kids; therefore, general rap groups may be the first choice for many young people. In addition, even in specific problem-focused groups that involve young people, the issues cover a much broader range than the corresponding adult group—youth groups tend to be generally more like rap groups.

## II. Self-Help Groups for Youth: What They Can Do

Why start a youth self-help group?
In what ways can youth learn and grow in a self-help group?

The article "Kids Helping Kids Cope" in the March/April 1981 edition of *The Self-Help Reporter,* the newsletter of the National Self-Help Clearinghouse, discusses the characteristics and benefits of youth self-help groups:

> Despite differences in structure and initial approach many groups faced similar problems and developed common solutions to them. Three basic goals that emerge are: to foster mutual support and self-help; to encourage psychological development and growth; and to develop interpersonal and (by extension) communal skills.

The following are important benefits young people can gain in mutual aid self-help groups.

### Sense of Belonging

Self-help groups enable youth to discover that they are not alone and that they can receive support from others who "have been there." Isolation may be the greatest problem kids face these days; even the most popular pastimes—watching television, playing video games or learning on a computer—are most often solitary activities. Ever more frequently the family support base of a child or teen is diminished, as extended family members live far away and both parents and siblings are busy with their own activities, coping with demanding lifestyles. Discovering

that others are in a similar position can remove the isolated feelings a youngster may have and lift some of the weight of a problem off his or her shoulders.

At a recent New Jersey Education Association conference on discipline, a high school senior from a Bayonne, New Jersey school that offers the Project Respect program of peer relations, communication and social support related her experience:

> "I was always in trouble freshman year. If I didn't like something in class, I would let the teacher know about it. I felt that no teacher could tell me what to do.
>
> I would talk about my frustrations with my peer group, and found that I wasn't the only one who had these feelings. I felt better talking about them and learned other ways of dealing with them that wouldn't be so destructive."

### Problem Solving

The creation of a non-judgmental atmosphere in a self-help group fosters a caring kind of problem-solving effort among its members. In fact, a group such as this may provide the only non-judgmental social involvement young people have, and the resulting freedom often helps to release feelings previously unshared. In this type of atmosphere no problem seems too big to be solved. A troubled person can sometimes defuse his or her problem just by talking about it, and helpful, non-judging suggestions from others in the group can produce concrete solutions. The saying runs: "Two heads are better than one," and when the two (or more) heads belong to similarly-aged people, the likelihood greatly increases that a common perspective and a more empathetic understanding of problems will emerge. The chronicle of a group for foster girls in New York City explains, "...perhaps it is the family-like quality of the group that means the most to the girls when all is said and done. In this family, help is given regardless of whether they 'deserved it' or not. Regardless of what they did, they were loved."

### Values Clarification

Changes in our society have made it difficult to form consistent, lasting values, and young people in particular may find it challenging to adopt a clear values system. Self-help groups can prompt a values clarification process that helps kids become aware of, express, explore and affirm their own personal values; this may also facilitate their understanding of the values of others. An open discussion fosters both sharing and respect, a combination that creates the aura of acceptance where there might have been rejection of ideas. This in turn encourages young people to view different sides of issues and to use a clear evaluating process in reaching their values decisions. Because these values have been thoughtfully considered, youth are more likely, then, to be aware of the beliefs they prize, to make decisions based on their beliefs, and to evaluate consequent outcomes.

### Communication Skills

Youth may gain or polish various social and communication skills through a self-help group as they interact in a helping environment. Groups consist mainly of discussion and members usually are communicating their opinions and feelings. A youth who learns speaking within a group can take that talent into the classroom, family and work life. Additionally, a person who is able to discuss his or her emotions can better release tension and enjoy peers than one who cannot communicate as well.

### Responsibility

In being able to talk over problems and provide solutions, youth find that they can have an impact on their own and each others' lives; events are not just happening to them. They become shapers of their own futures, short- and long-term, and they discover that what they do *does* matter. Not only can this give adolescents a sense of positive control not previously realized, but it also makes them feel more responsible for both their actions and lack of action. Self-responsibility is a tremendously important asset for a young person, a key building block for a successful, involved adult life.

### Feeling of Worth

Along with the feeling of responsibility, youth can gain self-esteem and self-respect from the process of helping themselves and others through mutual aid.

Realizing that one can make a difference in other people's lives is often such a positive experience that a youth can become more confident and capable in dealing with his or her own troubles. And those "helping youth" often become life-long helping resources, people to whom others can turn for support, information, and a caring, helping hand. The very concept of "helper-therapy," in which persons who have helped each other show increased benefit themselves, evolved from tutoring projects run by and for youth.

Although self-help groups are not a panacea for all of the problems and pains that youth encounter, the open, caring discussion they offer can help to alleviate isolation, suggest solutions to problems and build strengths and skills that will serve well through adolescence and adult lives. The value of mutual aid in self-help groups can have a profound effect and last a lifetime.

Self-Help Reporter Newsletter available from:
National Self-Help Clearinghouse
City University of New York Graduate Center
Room 1206A
33 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
(212) 840-1259

Project Respect
James Wasser, Director of Peer Programs
Bayonne Board of Education
Avenue A & 29th Street
Bayonne, New Jersey 07002

Lee, J. A., & Park, D. N. (1978). A group approach to the depressed adolescent girl in foster care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 48*(3).

## III. General Guidelines for Developing Self-Help Groups

Young people help each other and themselves all the time. Forming a youth self-help group is taking that natural self-help activity one step further, going beyond a circle of friends to know and share concerns with other young people. Youth self-help groups offer young people who face a common concern or problem the opportunity to meet with others like themselves and share their experiences, knowledge, strengths and hopes.

While there is no one recipe for starting a group, listed below are general guidelines that have proven helpful to many adults. They represent one general approach. Actual development and sequence will vary slightly, based upon choice of a particular self-help group model or other special circumstances or member preferences.

### Assess Need

Specific problems, such as the separation or divorce of parents, diabetes, or drug problems, may require a group that focuses on bringing together others with this particular problem. If the concerns are more general issues such as peer pressure, relationships or depression, a group focusing on general issues of concern to young people may be preferred. In either case, it is important to define clearly the goals of the group and to become aware of self-help group dynamics and how they differ from professionally-run therapy or support groups. For a better understanding of how self-help groups operate as voluntary, member-run, mutual help organizations, refer to readings on mutual help (see bibliography) or consider attending a local group that has open meetings.

### Assess Current Groups and Models

Existing national or model self-help groups are often wonderful resources of experience. A variety of these groups print development manuals or helpful guideline materials that can be obtained and reviewed. The New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse can help to identify national model groups. Attending meetings of other self-help groups may provide an understanding of their operation, as well as the most relevant techniques to be used in developing a group.

### Identify Interested Persons and Form a Core Group

Adults in various fields may be able to identify youth who face a specific problem and who would be helped by a self-help group that dealt with that problem. Young people who could benefit from a

general rap group may not be as easily recognizable. They themselves may not be aware of their troubles as solvable problems or realize the potential benefit of self-help groups. Below are listed a few categories to think of when identifying young people who could contribute to, benefit from, and draw more people into the self-help group that both kids and adults can use.

***Influence***

- students who influence others in the classroom
- kids who influence others outside the classroom

***Rumors***

- if there were a rumor being passed around (bad news, good news or gossip), who would be the first few kids to hear about it?

***Respect***

- kids who are nice to everyone
- kids who have good ideas and think of fun things to do
- kids who offer help when someone needs it
- kids others would like to work with
- kids who would do a good job of organizing a class party

Once several young people are interested in starting a group, not just joining one, the next step is to have a preliminary meeting of this "core group." A core group, because of shared interest and mutual support of the individuals, can address the tasks of planning the first meeting, arranging for a place to meet and a time, preparing publicity and clarifying the purpose of the group. Working together as a team, the core group will effectively model for others at the time of the first public meeting what self-help mutual aid is all about—not one person doing it all, but a group effort.

The New Jersey representative of *Toughlove* had an observation on leadership in her presentation at the New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse's 1985 Conference:

> "In truth, there's a leader in every group, they're just sitting on their hands most of the time. If nobody's there to lead, natural leaders will appear. I think that it's awfully important for self-help groups that the leadership be passed around the group. If you burn out the leaders, you'll use them up and they'll stop coming; then you won't have the benefit of anything in their minds or their experience."

If an adult is involved in the planning, this can be the time when the adult and the group determine what kind of relationship they will have, clarifying their roles.

### Plan, Publicize & Run the First Public Meeting

The first project of the core group is planning the first general meeting of the self-help group. Core group members can distribute responsibilities and ideas and offer support to each other. They can share tasks such as serving as co-chairs (if the youth facilitate their own group), making arrangements for the meeting space, serving as greeters, and providing refreshments. Sharing responsibilities also reduces the risk of "one leader burnout"—a phenomena likely to occur when one person assumes too many responsibilities. Perhaps most importantly, sharing responsibility allows all group members to feel a sense of ownership regarding the group.

Core group members can also begin work on publicity. Reaching potential members is never easy. Word of mouth, personal contacts and bringing along a friend or two are probably the best ways to involve other young people. Putting up posters or passing out flyers in places where young people go—schools, youth centers, pizzerias—is another good idea. Contacting guidance counselors, church youth directors or other professionals can be another approach to try, as well as seeking free announcements on the radio or in the local newspaper. Personal contact with potential members is of primary importance, and the positive, fun aspects of the group should be emphasized. The adult can assist in making referrals to this first meeting through his or her contacts with other adults and professionals.

### Run the First Meeting

The first meeting should be be arranged so that there will be ample time for participants to get to know one another. Ice-breakers and other activities can help people relax and begin to open up to one another. Members may also explore what needs they have in common that the group can address, as well as problems they all face.

### Plan Future Meetings

Considerations for future meetings may be the following:

a. Defining the purpose(s) of the group. Are they clear?
b. Membership. Who can attend meetings, who cannot? Should the regular membership be limited to young people with the same situation or problem, an associate membership being reserved for close friends? Should parents be invited to some meetings?
c. Frequency. What day and time are best for members? Most groups have found that meeting once or twice a month works best. When the group is held infrequently, young people are more likely to make it a priority in their schedules. An average group meeting is about an hour to an hour-and-a-half long. When combined with activities, meeting time is sometimes extended.
d. Meeting format. What choice or combination of discussion time, activities, education, business meeting and socializing suits the group best? What guidelines could be used to ensure that discussions be nonjudgmental, confidential and informative? If the group grows beyond six to twelve members, consider breaking down into smaller groups for discussion.
e. Age levels. Into what age groups should the young people divide? Trying to run a youth group that combines a wide age range is very difficult, because each age group has different developmental needs. While 7- to 11-year-olds need highly structured discussions or goal-oriented tasks, 12- to 14-year-olds require less structure and 15- to 20-year-olds even less.
f. Phone network. Self-help groups should provide an atmosphere of caring, sharing and support when needed. Many groups encourage the exchange of telephone numbers to provide help whenever needed.
g. Activities. The group may want to start with small projects which will elicit praise and support for a job well done. Groups can include guest speakers, films or special service projects as part of their plans—the sky is truly the limit.

Lastly, it is natural and to be expected that the group experience ups and downs in terms of attendance and enthusiasm. There may be the need to "trouble-shoot" or address new problems as they arise. An adult advisor can be very helpful to the group in solving problems such as a member who dominates discussion or low membership. Problem-solving and responsibility should always be a collaborative effort, however, so the youth can realize all of the benefits that self-help groups have to offer.

A representative from Alateen, a group for children of alcoholics, had an observation on the workings of a youth self-help group in his May 5, 1983 presentation at the annual New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse Conference:

> Friendship is much more important in the kids' group than in the adults' group; (in the adults' group) they are more serious...in any kind of youth group, it's more of a friendly kind of talking, where they can tell their problems and the kids can really give good feedback.
>
> ...During the week I'm probably going to have a problem; even if I had a great week I'll still go because I know that people over there had a bad week and maybe I can help.

His co-presenter added: "I go to meetings to help myself and to help other people too."

—And that is what self-help means to self-helpers.

*"Peer Pickin's" suggestions—ideas for identifying core group members—are courtesy of Project Respect in Bayonne, New Jersey.

Project Respect
James Wasser, Director of Peer Programs
Bayonne Board of Education
Avenue A & 29th Street
Bayonne, New Jersey 07002

*Transcripts of Toughlove representative Lane Peer's presentation at the Clearinghouse's 1985 Conference and Alateen representatives' presentation at the 1983 Conference both available through the Clearinghouse at 800-FOR-MASH.

## IV. Who Might Help Youth to Start a Self-Help Group?

Many groups of adolescents are quite capable of starting and running their own self-help groups and they should most certainly be encouraged to do so. The larger the role kids take in organizing and keeping the group running smoothly, the greater their sense of ownership. Often, however, a certain amount of adult involvement is useful, whether to supply information, names of contact people, or organizational skills—all of which are normally gained only through experience.

Adults from various fields and in various roles can be helpful. Parents, teachers, clergy, youth organization leaders (YMCA, Girl Scouts, etc.) and youth recreation directors as well as professionals in the medical, mental health and social service fields all have contact with young people. When this contact is infused with a basic trust in youth and a sincere interest in their concerns, then the groundwork is laid for adult help that can take several forms:

- **Initiator.** Takes the initiative in developing a group, recruiting a core group of youth, finding a meeting place, etc. May or may not have an ongoing role after the group is established and meeting regularly.
- **Consultant.** Initially provides information or advice to young people interested in starting a group. May later function as a "trouble shooter," helping with special problems for which the young people want help (dealing with problem members, permission and materials).
- **Advisor/Sponsor.** Committed to an ongoing relationship with the group. Remains in the background providing advice, consultation and encouragement. As older group members and leaders leave the group, contributes to group continuity.
- **Trainer.** Provides whatever training is necessary to prepare the young people to run their own group (communication skills, group dynamics, information related to their specific problems).
- **Encourager/Friend.** An informal role, helping kids to develop confidence in their ability to do youth self-help. In general, being a "friend" to the group.
- **Facilitator/Co-facilitator-** Leads or co-leads the group, guided by young people's issues. May also have been the initiator of the group.

Deciding on the appropriate role for an adult in a youth self-help group depends on many factors, including the severity of the problem, the age and maturity of the young people, how long the group has been going, and the "fit" between the abilities and desires of the young people involved. In general, with younger kids or those dealing with very severe problems (physical abuse, incest), more adult input will be required than with older kids and those dealing with less severe problems.

When adults begin youth self-help groups it appears that they seldom develop a core group of young people to work with in planning the group. This is understandable in some cases; for instance, when the problem is very serious (e.g., incest) it may prove difficult to find youth well enough along in admitting and working on the problem to be willing to be part of a core group. However, in general it appears that the adult should attempt to develop a core group of youth for most groups. Especially when the adult wants to be an advisor or sponsor rather than facilitator, the core group is strongly recommended as a way of ensuring that this will be the adult's role.

An adult's participation in the first meeting may vary from providing moral support to core group members who are chairing the meeting to addressing the group as a speaker or possibly being a co-leader if necessary. Whenever possible, the role should be

minimal to allow the youth to exercise and develop their own group competencies.

Adult helping roles may also change over time. Some adults have initially served as group starters and prepared the young people to take over, at which time they recede into the role of advisor. Ideally, once substantial progress has been made in working through start-up issues and struggles of group survival, youth will naturally take on more responsibility for the group and adult initiators less. There is always the risk, however, of adult involvement *not* decreasing, despite the ability and desire of youthful group members to run their own group. This is the problem of adult co-option which can all too easily drive away the very youth for whom the group was begun. See Chapter V for suggestions on how to avoid this.

Whatever roles the adult takes on, youth self-help groups should center on the genuine needs of the members, involve mutual help, draw on the youths' experiential knowledge, and be perceived by the young people as "their group."

A good example of adult involvement is depicted in the following, an excerpt from a workshop on children of separation and divorce held at the New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse's annual conference of May 26, 1983. The speakers are Jane Ban and Peter Guide, facilitators of a children's group that meets in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey; they explain how they became involved in starting the group.

> *Jane:* Four years ago our group started; I am a single parent, and I have four children. I've been separated and divorced for 10 years now, and at the time of my separation my children were 11, 10, 8 and 3. For the next couple of years it was a struggle with the kids. I can remember that it took my son, who was about 8 at the time, two years to admit that his father had left...We managed quite well because we had other support systems—the parish I belong to is a wonderful support system, my family was great—so we didn't have a lot of traumatic things. But I thought it would be nice if the children had somebody they could talk to...I thought, wouldn't it be great to have a group of kids just being together? They don't even have to talk about divorce, they could just know that if some issue came up, and they wanted to bounce it off on someone else, wouldn't it be great rather than always having this thing, this sign on their backs that they were different or abnormal?
>
> So after a couple of years I went to my parish with the idea. Father Bob was very involved with youth groups within the parish, all different kinds of youth groups. I said, "Come on, Bob, what do you think of this?" He agreed and was very enthusiastic. And I said, "I'll help if that's what it needs; I'd like to be a part of it."
>
> What we did from there: He knew families within the parish that were separated or divorced, and we brought together those people, those parents. We met with them a couple of times...We had a nice group of kids. The group that we started with were teenagers—the core group were teenagers. It went well. We discussed all kinds of things.
>
> Then Peter joined—you can tell them how you got involved.
>
> *Peter:* I was completing my Master's degree, and I was doing fieldwork placement at St. Mary's. Father Bob asked me if I would observe some of the meetings (I had told him previously that I had to do some legwork, visit different meetings and document that I had done so). So I visited the meeting, and right off the bat I was just captured by the idea of having a support group for children of separated and divorced parents, and really tending to the children's particular needs, almost as though the children themselves were divorced...What we've done is to create a space for children who all have a particular set of problems, who all have particular needs that are different problems and different needs than children who come from a family where there's been no divorce. The commonality of experience concept comes into play very strongly in our group because everybody that's in the group is a child that comes from a divorced family.

*A transcript of the presentation made by facilitators Jane Ban and Peter Guide of the children of separation and divorce group of Pompton Lakes at

the New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse conference in 1983 is available from the Clearinghouse.

## V. Promoting Youth Ownership in Self-Help Groups

A sense of "ownership" is vital to the viability and effectiveness of any self-help group—especially one for youth. Many factors contribute to young people feeling ownership of their group, among which are those related to group structure and process (for kids themselves to know) as well as those related to adult participation.

### Suggestions for Group Structure and Process

- Involve a core group from the earliest stages of group development, "thrashing out" objectives as well as planning for how to reach them.
- Develop an explicit structure for group decision-making. A formal and written one is a good idea. This structure belongs to the group, the adult included.
- Establish ground rules for group discussion. These are necessary to maintain control and facilitate the group process. Everyone, adults as well as youth, must abide by them.
- Youth can certainly lead meetings and run groups. Youth leadership seems to work best with paired leaders to balance each other's talents or serial leadership, a strategy by which the next leaders participate in the current work.
- The group process needs to encompass both youth ownership and adult guidance. Adults should try to avoid two common mistakes made in working with young people: (1) To be too much in charge, so that the young people involved have no real input, or (2) To just let youth "do their own thing" without any guidance.

### Suggestions for Adult Participation

- Be sure that the reason for starting or helping out with a youth self-help group is for the young people, not just to meet your own needs.
- Young people may not believe you mean it when you tell them it is their group. Be prepared for testing. When tested, be forthright in explaining your values, motives and feelings—everyone involved in the group must be willing to be open.
- Talk on a mutual level with youth, on a person-to-person level rather than an adult-to-child level. Be both a friend and an advisor. Listen carefully, respectfully and actively.
- Sustain confidence in the ability of youth to do the work even in turbulent times, and remember to be a lover of kids, "tuned in" as well as accepting and tolerant of their ways.

## VI. Meeting Formats

Depending on the issues addressed by a group and its particular stage of development, different meeting formats are more or less appropriate. The most important criteria for the choice of a group's meeting style is *what the members want*; in a youth group the young people's own preferences must be first.

The **first meeting** of any group has a format all to itself. Since members may not know each other very well or at all, introductions and brief self-descriptions are in order. To get the group off to a smooth start the initial meeting can also include group exercises and ice breakers. These can help young people get to know each other and can set a relaxed tone for the rest of the meeting. From that point on, any of several meeting formats can be chosen.

An **open discussion** group can be structured or unstructured. In an **unstructured** group meeting the members can bring up their day-to-day problems and experiences and exchange ideas, suggestions and support. Someone who had a misunderstanding with his or her parents, for example, or another who had an exciting talk about history with an elderly friend could discuss it with peers in the group. The topic of discussion is entirely up to those who attend the group meeting and can be decided by mutual consent or the normal flow of conversation. A **structured** group meeting has a specific topic of interest to the group members around which a

discussion proceeds. The group members may decide on a topic at the meeting itself, or they may decide during a prior meeting, so they can think about the topic in advance or even read about it. Possible topics can cover a wide range of subjects and emotions; a list of suggestions can be found in the following section.

An **informational** meeting is just that; it serves to educate the group members in an area of common interest. The topic is chosen by the members (see discussion topics section), usually the direct result of a prior group discussion. A single group member may find it of special interest and prepare a report for the rest of the group. The group may arrange for a knowledgeable guest speaker to attend and have a discussion afterward. SADD (Students Against Driving Drunk), for example, may ask a police officer to attend a meeting and discuss the facts about drinking and driving. Usually both the speaker and the group benefit from their contact.

Young people are active and enjoy doing as well as talking. Many groups combine activity and discussion in each meeting. The activity can be drawing, role playing, games, letter writing (such as to a sibling to tell how they feel about an occurrence), music, reading relevant books, viewing films or simply going out together after the group meeting. **Action planning** can channel this energy into productive results. A group may decide to visit a local home for the elderly, for example, or clean up a local park. SADA, Students Against Drug Abuse, a group based in a Jersey City junior high, made posters and produced a play for an anti-drug campaign in its school. These efforts turn action into activities from which the community and the young people themselves can benefit.

*SADD (Students Against Driving Drunk)
P.O. Box 800
Marlboro, Massachusetts 20814

*SADA (Students Against Drug Abuse)
St. Anne School
255 Congress Street
Jersey City, New Jersey 07307

## VII. Discussion Topics

People who participate in self-help groups inherently have great personal incentive to talk over their problems or life situations. Frequently, however, they are strangers and discussion may not be automatic or easy. Having a list of possible discussion topics can be a real boon, whether formulated in advance for a particular meeting or held in reserve for an especially quiet meeting. The purpose of asking related questions or bringing up topics for discussion is to help individuals think about and share their experiences and concerns. There are no right and wrong answers or responses, only differences reflecting the different stages in which people find themselves regarding any life stress. The discussion topics should not be points of contention but rather a means to exchange ideas and opinions.

The following are suggestions for self-help groups dealing with medical and mental health problems. These are merely suggested questions which can be added to and adapted to the situation that is relevant to the people in a particular group.

- How did I feel when I was first told that I had____?
- What was my family's and friends' reaction to the news that I had____? How did it differ from what I expected? From what I wanted?
- What would I say in a note or a letter to someone who was facing what I have faced?
- What is the worst problem that a person and his/her family must face as a result of this?
- Who is the easiest person to talk to about this? Why? Who is the hardest person? Why?
- Who has been most supportive and helpful to me in dealing with this situation, and how?
- With whom do I get angry? About what?
- What do people do that makes me feel especially good?
- How do I deal with any loneliness I feel?
- How do I deal with any fear I have due to having____?
- What used to be the expectations I held for myself, before I learned that I had____? How have these expectations changed?

- Generally, how has my life changed? What new values and priorities do I have now that I did not have before?
- If I have learned anything special about life or human nature as a result of my____, what is it?

Discussion topics for general youth groups can cover an equally important yet wider range of subjects. At the beginning of 1984, the Student Outreach Service, an active in-house peer group, conducted a survey of fellow students at Ramsey High School to discover important teenage concerns. The results indicated topics important to students and also gave the SOS Club new subjects for their open discussion sessions. The outcome follows (out of 555 surveys collected):

### Concerns

| | |
|---|---|
| Depression | 250 |
| Peer pressure | 246 |
| Family fights | 233 |
| Relationships | 230 |
| Drug use | 213 |
| Future planning | 213 |
| Handling emotions | 202 |
| Family alcoholism | 201 |
| Family communication | 200 |
| Dating | 188 |
| Moral judgments and values | 159 |
| Boredom | 149 |
| Reality of death | 147 |
| Family divorce | 134 |
| Self-esteem | 115 |
| Loneliness | 113 |
| Running away | 112 |
| Mental abuse | 111 |
| Child abuse | 86 |

### Students' Suggestions for Topics

Drunk driving
Suicide
Pregnancy
Friends
Attitudes
Financial problems
Teenage crime and vandalism
Student/teacher relationships
Will power
Sex
School pressures
Parties

The International Youth Council of Parents Without Partners has also addressed the challenge of topics for youth discussion. This national organization, in their own words, "brings teens from single parent homes together to share ideas and problems, develop leadership and re-enter the mainstream of life beyond boundaries of the single parent group." Their suggestions are as follows:

### Suggested Topics for Teens

College—is it necessary?
Student unrest—why?
Sex education—do I need it?
Race relations
Nuclear war
Parents
How to live on an allowance
Is there anything good to be said about tradition?
Alcohol, tobacco and drugs
Religion and the teen view
Self discipline—will it work?
Responsibility—how much should teens have?
Should schools operate year round?
How much influence does the peer group have on me?
Birth control, abortion—pros and cons
Skin problems and how to cope with them
At what age should dating begin?
Popularity—at what price?
Should clothes and hair make a difference?
Where can I get financial assistance to go to college?
What will I major in and why?
Do I want to be a leader or a follower and why?
Should teens get involved in community projects?

A general rap group has an enormous capacity to help children and adolescents understand and deal with issues they face. Discussion of important topics is the key to this process.

An example is the after-school peer discussion groups in the middle schools of the Lenape Regional

School District, a program of the Network agency of Medford, New Jersey. These youth self-help groups exist "to help middle school students cope with and learn skill-building techniques to deal with peer pressure and other concerns." Teens from the local high schools undergo training in peer relations, and they act as co-facilitators for the group. The result is a non-judgmental rap group that allows the adolescents to voice their concerns on an array of subjects and become more aware of differing viewpoints regarding those topics. The program has been very successful.

*Student Outreach Service
Ramsey High School
Ramsey, New Jersey 07446

*International Youth Council
7910 Woodmont Avenue Suite 1008
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

## VIII. Basic Helping Skills

In a self-help group, the role of facilitating or leading a group discussion is not the sole responsibility of one person but really a function of the entire group. Thus, all members would do well to:

- Help members feel comfortable and get to know each other.
- Be sure the speaker has finished describing the problem before offering advice.
- Listen attentively when another member is speaking and not engage in side conversations.
- Promote positive comments and new viewpoints (keeping the discussion upbeat) lest the discussion deteriorate into a gripe session.
- Notice silent people in the group and encourage them to contribute.
- Participate in the discussion, sharing problems and offering ideas and advice.
- Recognize when a member's problem is beyond the group's ability to help and be willing to suggest resources outside the group.
- Assure fellow members that whatever is said in the group stays there (maintain confidentiality), as this will greatly increase the amount shared.
- Make a commitment to the group, contributing whatever talents, skills, resources and information are necessary to ensure the group's success and survival.

The key ingredient in most helping relationships is the sense on the part of the person being helped that he or she is being **listened** to. The term **active listening** refers to everything that someone might do in order to not only listen but let the speaker know he or she is being listened to.

Non-verbal cues that a person is listening can foster a genuine rapport between two people, and those in a peer supportive atmosphere should be aware of non-verbal signals sent and received. A cue can be leaning forward with a listening face, saying "mm hmm," or opening eyes wider in shared disbelief; or it can be simply sitting back in a comfortable yet attentive position while continuing good eye contact. Speakers often reveal their feelings through non-verbal cues—"body language" as it has come to be known. The listener can tap this resource in trying to understand a speaker, and can reflect interested and caring non-verbal signals in return.

One example of a curriculum designed specifically to help youth hone their listening and helping skills is Project Respect, in the Bayonne, New Jersey, School District. Directed by Jim Wasser, it teaches students peer-helping skills in 22 weekly sessions of 45 minutes each, and one 48-hour workshop. These skills (listed below) do not turn students into therapists, but do enable them to better understand both verbal and nonverbal communication, and to respond more helpfully to each other.

1. Attending Skills—to understand meanings and convey this understanding to the speaker
   - paraphrasing feelings
   - paraphrasing ideas
   - identifying non-verbal messages
   - paraphrasing whole messages
2. Adding Direction and Clarification Skills
   - summarizing ideas and feelings while emphasizing what the speaker has defined as the most the important part of the message
   - summarizing ideas and feelings while offering an educated guess as to what may be the underlying problem

   (Students using these skills are reminded to make their summaries and guesses tentative.)

3. Facilitation Skills
   - clarifying group tasks and agenda, staying on task, delegating responsibilities
   - maintaining group process, ensuring that all individuals attend non-verbally and give support and understanding to all other individuals.

4. Confrontation Skills. People need a way of giving negative feedback without hurting the person who is repeatedly presenting discrepancies or contradictions. Confrontation according to these guidelines is is a good way to minimize negativism:
   - asking permission (timing is important)
   - defining/describing behavior or contradiction
   - telling how **you** feel about what the person does
   - being tentative and non-judgmental, without blaming or giving advice
   - checking out what the person's reaction is, (e.g., "I don't know—is that right?") (Whenever they use these skills, students should try never to "put down" or "give advice" to fellow members.)

Young people who can use basic listening skills have an enormous amount to offer each other in the way of support, resources and friendship. A youth support group may become one of the most important parts of a young person's life, and the benefits gained and given can easily change that life for the better.

*Project Respect
James Wasser, Director of Peer Programs
Bayonne Board of Education
Avenue A & 29th Street
Bayonne, New Jersey 07002

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## Appendix A
## About the Clearinghouse

The New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse, a project of St. Clare's Hospital in Denville, New Jersey, provides information and referral, free consultation, and training services for self-help groups throughout the state of New Jersey. The first computerized operation of its type in the nation, the Clearinghouse maintains and continually updates a database of information on over 3000 group meetings within the state, over 270 national headquarters and demonstration models, and about 75 helplines/ hotlines.

Easy access to this information is assured through our two toll-free phone lines, and yearly calls have averaged about 6000. Mutual aid self-help (MASH) groups are receiving increased national recognition as valuable sources of social support, practical education, volunteer services and coping skills—not alternatives to professional services but rather supplements to them.

An important component of our work is the development of new groups as needs arise. For example, if a caller inquires about a support group for single parents, and the computer search yields nothing in the caller's county or area, we would invite the person to start a group, offering technical assistance and free listing in our computer. In that way, future callers could be referred to him or her as a contact person interested in starting such a group. Since January of 1981 over 260 callers have successfully started groups in the state, adding significantly to the MASH resources available at little cost to the public.

The Clearinghouse welcomes requests for information and referral on Mondays through Fridays, 9AM to 5PM. At all other times we utilize an answering machine to take calls, and then return them on the next work day.

The New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse
Saint Clare's Hospital
Denville, NJ 07834
201-625-7101

In New Jersey, toll-free, 1-800-367-6274
(that's 1-800-FOR-MASH)
Mutual Aid Self-Help

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*At the time this article was written Mary Kay Parkinson and Nancy Sax were both VISTA volunteers on the staff of the New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse.*

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# Introducing and Tapping Self-Help Mutual Aid Resources

**Catherine J. Paskert and Edward J. Madara**

## Introduction

The self-help movement currently sweeping the country is an extraordinary phenomenon that has implications for school officials in general and for health educators, school nurses, and counselors in particular. Variously known as self-help, mutual-aid, or mutual-help groups, these informal member-run organizations have evolved rapidly since the mid-1970s and endeavor to help people of all ages cope with a wide variety of disabilities, parenting concerns, illnesses, and other stressful life situations and transitions.

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A national policy recommendation of the Department of Health and Human Services calls for doubling the number of individuals reached by self-help groups by the end of this decade, from a 1978 baseline estimate of 2.5 to 5 million people (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1980).

## Nature and Development of Self-Help Groups

Self-help groups are characterized by being member-run, voluntary associations composed of peers who come together for the primary purpose of mutual aid and support. The groups also provide opportunities for education; skills building; and, in some cases, needed advocacy.

Alcoholics Anonymous, organized in 1935, generally is regarded as the forerunner of twentieth century self-help groups. From this daring concept of nonprofessional support was spawned a generation of groups having primarily

an addition or behavior modification focus (e.g., Gamblers Anonymous, 1957 for compulsive gamblers; Narcotics Anonymous, 1953 for drug addicts; and Overeaters Anonymous, 1960 for overweight persons). Other premier groups with specific health related concerns included Recovery, Inc. (1937) for former mental patients and persons with nervous problems; and Mended Hearts, Inc. (1951) for recovered heart surgery patients.

The decline of the extended family along with the erosion of support formerly provided by the church, neighborhood, and community (Gartner & Reissman, 1977) gave rise to another generation of self-help groups that focused on a wide range of contemporary social, political, and economic issues. Better known among the groups formed more recently are: the Gay Alliance Activists (1969) to promote the rights of homosexuals; Parents Anonymous (1971) to aid parents who have abused their children; and Remove Intoxicated Drivers (1982) to lobby for more rigorous drunk driving legislation.

The evolution and recent astonishing proliferation of groups suggests that self-help is neither a new concept nor a new fad approach to relief from human stress. The sometimes transient nature of the groups makes it difficult to arrive at a precise quantitative statement of their numbers. However, based upon an extrapolation of the number of self-help groups extensively identified in the state of New Jersey (Larkin & Madara, 1983), a conservative estimate is that at any given time there are over three million active members in over 100,000 self-help groups throughout the national.

There is no universally acknowledged typology of self-help groups (Gartner & Riessman, 1977; Lieberman & Borman, 1979); however, they may be broadly classified as follows: 1) physical and mental illness groups that assist patients, parents, and families with practically every major disease as well as a plethora of other health-related disorders; 2) behavior modification groups, such as the "anonymous" organizations, which focus on a wide range of addictive behaviors; 3) social support groups for persons facing other life transitions or situations (e.g., parents, the divorced, and the bereaved); and 4) other, more advocacy-centered groups for special populations, emphasizing the rights of women, the elderly, homosexuals, and other minorities.

Represented within these categories are groups for almost every imaginable human condition or concern. Consequently, anyone seeking assistance is likely to identify a nearby group that already is dealing with their problem. If not, there is a nationwide network of clearinghouses (see appendix) equipped to assist in organizing a group that will meet unique interests and needs. The gravity of the problems addressed also is varied and ranges from minor inconvenience to tragic misfortune. Such variety is illustrated by the formation of groups that focus on problems as diverse as left-handedness, short stature, stuttering, herpes, widowhood, and terminal illness.

Helper therapy (Riessman, 1965), which espouses the benefits of peer-counseling to the helper as well as the helpee, is a common dynamic found in most self-help groups. Otherwise, the groups are multifarious—with differences noted in size, age and background of members, and types and intensity of activities. The groups are also varied with respect to purpose, but the major goal of most is to effect some needed change (Lieberman & Borman, 1979). Groups either focus on modifying or controlling behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Parents Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and anorexia nervosa groups) or concentrate on helping members adjust to changes in significant life situations (e.g., handicap, terminal illness, death of a loved one, job loss, divorce, and learning disability).

Some local groups have the added dimension of affiliation with national societies or foundations or with organizations that emphasize public education, fund raising, legislative lobbying, and research. Others may be affiliated with local agencies or institutions or with professional care providers such as hospitals, physicians, and counselors. In the final analysis, most self-help groups serve several of the following purposes: 1) providing emotional support through discussion with others who share a similar stress or situation; 2) improving the understanding of one's condition through a pooling of experiential knowledge; 3) giving practical assistance in the development of coping skills; and 4) generating public awareness and social change by establishing an active, visible advocacy role.

Operational requirements generally are modest; therefore, groups are usually self-supporting and seldom solicit funds from other sources. The nature and frequency of meetings are determined by the specifc goals of the groups, as is the length of membership. Some, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, promote an active and long-term commitment; while others, such as the La Leche League for nursing mothers, foster short-term association. The meetings may be held in the homes of members or, more likely, in free or inexpensive community facilities such as libraries, schools, hospitals, and churches (DHHS, 1981).

Originally and more widely known as self-help organizations, the groups can be more appropriately referred to as mutual-help groups because this designation more accurately describes the special interaction that occurs among members. Typically, members gain a broader perspective of their own problem and subsequently take a more active role in helping others in the group (Withorn, 1980). This role reversal, from that of an entry level receiver and benefactor to a seasoned and caring provider, may account for the self-perpetuating character and longevity of some of the groups.

## Implications of Self-Help Groups for Schools

On a day-to-day basis, schools are frequently required to cope with assorted health problems that are fairly common among youthful populations. A

more recent expectation is that schools will also attend to the intractable "new morbidity" which includes learning problems, behavioral disorders, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and child abuse (Silver, 1981). These challenges, coupled with the dilemma of remaining in compliance with legal mandates to provide health services at a time when budgets are severely eroded by inflation, emphasize the advantages of professional interface with self-help groups.

Despite the availability and reported success of self-help groups in assisting individuals with almost every imaginable human condition, the referral value of this resource remains largely unrecognized and untapped by educators. This is not to say that self-help groups can be all things to all people, but neither can schools. There are limitations to what school staff can reasonably do to meet the expanding needs for support and help of both youths and families. The addition of self-help groups to the local resources schools generally refer to when there is a need for services that are not available internally is an idea that has scarcely been explored. Perhaps the time has come for educators to more aggressively investigate the potential of support groups as a means of outreach to the "unserved" and "undeserved."

As professionals, school administrators, guidance counselors, nurses, and teachers are in a position to encourage and network parents into new groups (e.g., parents of gifted children, parents of handicapped children, and single parents). In the absence of any effective health services advocacy for children, parents represent the most important backers they have (Hoppe, 1979; Silver, 1981). Educators can also help by sponsoring or starting youth groups such as children of divorced parents, abused children, children of alcoholics (Alateen), and children of gamblers or Gamateen.

Beyond a doubt, there is a need among some children for the very kinds of acceptance, encouragement, and support that self-help groups can provide. This does not imply the replacement of professional care. To the contrary, it suggests that there are circumstances when selected groups can be effective adjuncts to professional intervention (Riessman, 1982). There are instances when professional care providers do recommend self-help group participation in conjunction with medical or psychological care, (e.g., professional referral of anorexics to self-help groups). Professional sanction, whether it be referrals or any other manner of affiliation, contributes to the growing acceptance of self-help groups as appropriate forms of health care.

It should also be emphasized that self-help groups are not anti-professional. In fact, professionals are sometimes instrumental in the founding of self-help groups (e.g., Parents Anonymous, Recovery, Inc.) and often work along with them. One value of self-help groups is their availability and capability to assist in situations when professional services are unavailable, unaffordable, or nonexistent or when there is a need that can better be filled by peer group support.

In the area of special education, self-help groups are particularly important for providing support and education to students and parents. For example, for students there are student-age groups for juvenile diabetes and juvenile arthritis; and for parents there are dozens and dozens of groups for learning disabilities in general (e.g., Tourette Syndrome, mental retardation, and dyslexia). Also, family action groups exist, such as Tough Love and Families Anonymous, that deal with adolescent behavior.

The support and education that these groups provide supplement professional services. Moreover, the groups also can serve as constituency for promoting the funding and development of specialized professional services within the school as well as resource for needs assessment.

In addition to the emotional support that groups provide, a primary benefit is education. Self-help groups create new learning opportunities for parents as well as students, whether a single parent group learning how to improve parenting techniques or a group of students learning about the disease aspects of alcoholism. Therefore, the advisability of making curricular adjustments—especially in health education—that would increase student awareness of support groups as legitimate self-referral alternatives is an area that warrants attention by the education community. A key ingredient essential to achieving this goal is health educators who are attuned to the movement and who are cognizant of the potential of these groups for managing personal crises. The very diversity of the gorups increases the number of opportunities for the mutual help concept to be introduced into any health curriculum. For example, the WHY? WHAT? and HOW? of self-help groups could be incorporated with the study of mental health, aging, nutrition, sexuality, substance abuse, human disease, or most any other health topic. The value and variety of self-help groups could later be reinforced by recommending representative groups, along with other intervention and management alternatives, to whichever health problems are under study. Some of the specific groups that would likely be identified in health education classes are the well established organizations (e.g. Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous) and the emerging youth groups concerned with problems of the handicapped or teenage parents.

An often overlooked aspect and benefit of self-help groups is the vast scope of their educational outreach to the general student or public community. In addition to educational benefits that have already been noted, the goal of sensitizing students to important health, social, political, and economic issues is another benefit that could be met by inviting members of selected self-help groups to serve as resource persons for classes and special programs. With thoughtful selection and planning, group members could make a

powerful impact in these settings. There are indications that school officials are beginning to tap this resource capability. Such indications include cases of laryngectomee club members conducting "stop smoking" programs in schools and of epileptics educating school children to the problems associated with epilepsy. Other groups, such as Mothers Against Drunk Drivers and Remove Intoxicated Drivers, frequently report they are both pleased and overwhelmed with requests to participate in school alcohol-awareness programs. Inviting group members of course is a spin-off of the long-time practice of inviting Alcoholics Anonymous members as guest speakers. More importantly, it demonstrates the availability and great variation in local resource people. As a direct result of the considerable increase in number and kind of self-help groups, there now are far more opportunities for educators to selectively infuse programs, classes, and meetings with first-hand accounts from an array of people "who have been there and can tell it like it is."

Another related development is the emergence of student assistance programs with a membership that is apt to be selective and well-trained. From early investigations of the value of student peer counseling, the concept of "helper-therapy" was postulated. The recent development of self-help groups targeted specifically for youth is a natural extension of this thought. Using youth as a resource to other youth with both giver and receiver benefiting is often more beneficial than the traditional role of adults directing youth to work. Students Against Drunk Driving and Children of Separated and Divorced Parents are examples of recently organized single-purpose youth groups.

The recent growth of self-help groups has been paralleled by the development of self-help clearinghouse operations, of which there are twenty in the United States (see appendix). Clearinghouses promote an increased awareness, understanding, and utilization of groups, as well as increased collaboration between self-help and professional communities. Many provide consultation and training services for developing new groups. Such clearinghouses, several of which are university sponsored, can assist school personnel in identifying current resources and models as well as explore research strategies aimed at tapping the movement's energy and potential.

## Summary

This article has presented an overview of the characteristics and growth of twentieth century self-help groups, as well as the variety, purposes, and values of these rich and unique peer support services. The article recounts the mutual help concept of people with like problems helping one another to cope and change and discusses the diversity of groups in relation to problem, process, and program emphasis.

Changing social conditions, including the new morbidity, often affect school children so profoundly that external intervention of varying types is needed. Self-help groups are recommended as one outside element having the flexibility to be used or developed in conjunction with professional services or, when appropriate, to be used in lieu of them.

The referral, educational, and emotional support implications of self-help groups are examined with an emphasis on the need for school staff to become more aware and knowledgeable regarding the value of this affordable and widely available community resource. The self-help group modality is not proposed as a panacea for coping with contemporary health and social problems. Rather, the magnitude of the recent expansion and the reported success of this social phenomenon reflect how students and families can benefit significantly and measurably from the judicious use of this human services resource.

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# Community Post-Tornado Support Groups

## Conceptual Issues and Personal Themes

**Thomas E. Long and Wayne C. Richard**

### Introduction

Over the past 10 years policymakers, administrators and community mental health practitioners have become increasingly sophisticated in their attempts to provide crisis intervention services to those affected by natural disasters (Cohen, 1985). Reports summarizing mental health services to disaster survivors have recommended nontraditional services, including assertive community outreach and the building of support networks (Heffron, 1977; Richard, 1974; Tuchman, 1973; Zarle, Hartsough, and Ottinger, 1974). Solomon (1985) has observed that mental health professionals can facilitate the construction of new social support networks for disaster victims through the formation of crisis groups. She noted attempts to establish such groups following several types of disasters met with variable success. While the crisis group is a promising vehicle for post-disaster intervention, few guidelines have been offered for establishing and operating such groups. It is our purpose in this presentation to review the sparse literature in this area and to bring together some relevant conceptual issues about the use of groups in post-disaster counseling following a series of devastating tornados in rural eastern North Carolina. We will also present a description of the clinical themes and issues generated by this approach. The specific intervention methods utilized as well as attendant evaluation data are presented in the companion poster presentation, *Community Post-Tornado Support Groups: Intervention and Evaluation* by Susan McCammon, Leslie Parker and Randy Horton.

### Conceptual Issues

#### Use of Group Methods in Crisis Intervention

Group counseling in crisis intervention has followed the principles discovered by Lindemann (1944) and extended by Caplan (1964). The success Lindemann had in counseling with victims of the famous Coconut Grove fire led to the notion that people who suddenly suffer significant loss can be aided by brief grief counseling. Caplan observed that families who had a premature infant adapted in either healthy or unhealthy ways. Those who had healthy outcomes were families that faced problems squarely, thought about them, and sought information to help solve them. Family interaction and sharing facilitated the outcome. There was good communication and clear role assignments among the

members. The expression of feelings was encouraged. The opposite was true for the families who adapted poorly to a premature birth.

Strickler and Allgeyer (1967) and Morley and Brown (1969) extended the earlier work into a crisis intervention setting with heterogeneous groups of clients. They tried open-end group membership and six weekly sessions. They kept the discussion focused at first on the precipitating event and the previous coping behavior which failed. The treatment included group support, exploring alternative coping mechanisms, and expressing feelings. The outcomes were positive in that destructive behavior and anxiety were reduced, self-concepts improved, and the clients learned more adaptive problem solving strategies for future crises.

Farberow (1976) reports studies of long-term, intermediate and drop-in group treatment for suicidal clients of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center. He states that subjective reports of the participants indicated a very positive reaction to treatment. The group leaders also saw constructive behavior changes in most of the clients, with lethality reduced and self-perceptions improved. Coping behavior also improved, as evidenced by social behavior, "work like" changes, and reduced reliance on self-destructive "crutches."

Although the Farberow work and other studies just described which involve crisis clients do not represent disaster situations, they indicate that group methods do work with people in crisis situations.

## Use of Group Approach in Disaster Counseling

In most reports of a disaster crisis counseling intervention effort that the authors have reviewed, some mention has been made of group methodology. The types of groups, their purposes, composition, structure and meeting places vary quite a bit. All the reports indicate that the group sessions have been meaningful to the participants, and that positive results have occurred in helping people make a better adjustment to their experience.

Natural and existing groups are frequently utilized in these intervention programs. The family is often seen in such recovery efforts, and the use of neighbor and friendship ties has also been incorporated in group intervention strategies (Smith, 1983). However, Solomon's (1985) focus on *new* social support networks is especially relevant to the present study. In particular, establishing the new groups from the roll of disaster survivors provides unique advantages.

Grossman (1973) reported on a series of support groups which included survivors, relatives and mental health workers following a Chicago train wreck. A vital recovery element for those who participated was grounded in the experience of survivors sharing with other survivors. Participants uniformly felt that not even family members could adequately understand and empathize with the felt trauma.

As Solomon (1985) notes, a disaster may disrupt existing social networks which in turn is itself an additional source of stress. Centering recovery efforts around emerging survivor groups creates a new and unique group solidarity that can be utilized as an active mutual aid system providing the emotional sustenance of new friendships and confidants.

Along yet another track, the development of newly formed support groups permits a higher degree of flexibility to facilitators for structuring overall group operation, since specific expectations and fixed patterns of response are not as likely to exist as would be the case with kinship or friendship groups in operation prior to the disaster. Facilitators may well have a greater opportunity for success at structuring in action oriented, problem focused intervention efforts—which have been found to be the more effective crisis intervention approaches (Hart, 1974; Robinson and Campbell, 1976).

With regard to the place of meeting for post-disaster groups, Farberow (1978) and others have noted that meeting places in community facilities other than the "stigmatizing" Mental Health Center is conducive to greater success. Apparently the "neutral" gathering place helps avoid the various connotations which foster resistance to attendance.

In summary, the literature does provide some relevant guidance for the effective use of post-disaster group counseling. First, the use of group process in post-disaster intervention is pervasive. Groups composed of survivors have advantages by virtue of their inherent newly formed nature. The more effective active intervention group strategies may be employed to better advantage in this particular circumstance. Operating post-disaster counseling groups in a "neutral" setting is also reportedly conducive to greater success.

These guidelines were combined and systematically followed in the groups developed following the North Carolina tornado disaster to be described further in this presentation. We intend now to briefly elaborate the background circumstances which led to the creation of the groups and to present a description of the breadth of clinical issues and themes emerging from the group process structured in this manner. In addition, the poster session mentioned above, which is a companion to this presentation, will elucidate the specific group structure, evolution, intervention techniques and evaluations of the four groups.

## The 1984 Carolinas' Tornado Community Crisis Group Circumstances and Beginnings

During the evening and late hours of March 28, 1984 a series of tornadoes coursed through South Carolina and Eastern North Carolina causing traumatic personal injury, loss of life and extensive economic devastation. Directly in the path of this great crippling sweep lay small (pop. 16,117) agrarian Greene County, North Carolina. With surprising speed the County governing body created the Greene County Disaster Committee whose two paid coordinators assessed the damage in both economic and human terms. Within five weeks the Disaster Committee convened the first community group meeting at the county seat's extension college. Two consulting mental health personnel from adjoining Pitt County conducted proceedings for the fifty some adults and children who ventured out. Several months later, three groups were established in the adjoining Pitt County program.

## Clinical Issues and Themes Expressed

People who had been injured and lost loved ones or property expressed in varied measure the tragedy thrust in their lives. There was talk of feeling stunned and paralyzed at the impact and of not recognizing the severity of what had occurred. People wondered about their automatic actions immediately around the event. One woman spoke of "spacing out" periods where time went by but she couldn't account for it.

Another recurrent theme was the anxiety and fear which settled in with daily life. Stimuli, however remotely connected with weather, triggered unsettling worries. Adults and children alike sought the security of being with others.

Anger, depression and guilt appeared frequently, as did feelings of distance from those who missed damage. Resentment of bureaucratic slowness and supposed capriciousness surfaced.

Following is a categorization and description of these issues and themes expressed in the support groups:

*PTSD Symptoms*:

Based on responses to symptom checklist, 2/3 of respondents endorsed symptoms consistent with PTSD diagnostic criteria.

*Physical Issues:*

Physical injuries, insomnia, decreased appetite, "my pounding heart," weight loss/gain, headaches.

*Emotional Issues:*

Frustration, grief, anxiety, emotions out of control, crying, oversensitive, irritability, fears (especially fear of storms, being alone), feeling of not being the same, feeling something is going to happen, guilt/thankfulness, feeling of "I can't get over it," not feeling "at home" in new surroundings, gratitude for community support and people caring—emotional work delayed for those with especially severe physical injuries.

*Cognitive Issues:*

Am I normal?, decreased memory and ability to concentrate, "unless you were there you can't understand," decreased ability to make decisions, worry, hard to regain interest in things, catastrophic thinking, relating of loud noises, storms, dark clouds to tornado, dread of next spring with approaching tornado season, social comparison, religious ideas very important for many.

*Behavioral Issues:*

Explicit description of tornado experience, need to tell and retell story, withdrawal, "clamming up," less effort to get out and resume activities.

*Helper Issues:*

Frustration, can't do enough, "wish I could do more," "feels good to play Santa," counter-transference.

## Conclusions

The breadth and number of the disaster related personal issues and themes generated in these groups seemed rather remarkable to the facilitators. Some participants progressed from a kind of initial "elective mutism" to a position of being expressive of both feelings and ideas related to their disaster experience. The one vehicle that almost universally occurred with participants as they emerged from their shell and took a position of active group membership was the "telling of one's story." Each person had a style, a pace and a content of his/her own, but that ubiquitous catharsis distinguished virtually each individual's coming out of self into the group. We believe that the structuring of the group experience based in part on the principles identified from several individual literature sources described above and combined for use in these groups helped facilitate the breadth and abundance of themes and issues generated.

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# Coping With Desert Storm

## Ideas for Starting and Running A Self-Help Support Group

**Joal Fischer**

### WHAT IS A SELF-HELP GROUP?

A self-help group is made up of people getting together to help each other deal with a shared concern. Run by and for the members, a group can be started by anyone with a bit of courage, a sense of commitment, and a good dose of caring.

### WHAT CAN I DO IN A SELF-HELP GROUP?

* Give and receive emotional support (You aren't alone)
* Share information and resources (So that's where you find it!)
* Trade new ways of solving problems (It's not as hard as it looks)
* Advocate as a group to attain common goals (Groups do things that individuals can't do alone)
* Allow yourself to have a good time (Reduce stress and anxiety)

### WHAT DO I DO TO START A GROUP?

#### 1) Don't Re-Invent The Wheel

Consider visiting another similar support group. Group members often share ideas, formats, and energy. Call the people at your local self-help clearinghouse. They will help you find other support groups and may be able to provide you with consultation to help you get your group started.

#### 2) Consider Hooking Up With A Supportive Organization

Some support groups have hooked up with an existing organization such as the American Red Cross, church, synagogue, library, or military family support unit.

These organizations are often willing to share resources with your group at little or no cost. These include a meeting place, copying equipment, refreshments, and other facilities that can make your start-up much easier. They may even have experience in starting this type of group.

However, joining forces can have disadvantages. Be sure that you know what the organization expects (if anything) from your support group. Keep in mind that it is sometimes difficult to get unhooked. If you are unsure, do it on your own. You can always hook up with an organization at a later date.

#### 3) Think Shared Leadership From The Start

Have a planning meeting with a few others who share your interest in starting (not simply joining) the group. Starting with a core group can help:

* Prevent burn out
* Distribute the work of starting the group
* Model for others what self-help is all about -- it's a group (rather than individual) effort.

Try to make your core group representative of your expected membership. For suggestions on how to find co-leaders, see page 3 ("How do we get the word out?").

#### 4) Remain Politically Neutral

War is controversial; everyone in your group will have feelings for and against this war. Remaining officially neutral will allow members to talk more openly. It is important that members feel free to discuss their thoughts and feelings without fear of criticism.

## WHAT ARE SOME IDEAS FOR PROGRAMS?

Check out potential programs carefully. Be wary of "generous" people whose program is really designed to sell you something. In general, programs should appeal to the entire membership. However, if a program is aimed at part of the membership (such as women), plan a program (for men) for the same time. Here are some ideas:

* Coping with the adjustments and grief that accompany separation
* Reuniting families successfully (or "Now That He/She Is Home, Why Isn't Everything Perfect?")
* How to communicate with deployed individuals (such as what to put in letters, how to have enjoyable telephone conversations, and how to use ham or fax communication)
* How to obtain important information from the military
* How to set up a family budget and use a checkbook
* Dealing with holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions
* Helping members of the group whose relatives become POW's or MIA's, are injured, or who die
* How group members can support each other during an illness or other crisis
* Finding and utilizing community resources
* Identifying and coping with family problems
* How to keep the communication lines open with your children
* How to be honest with your kids when you are scared
* How to minimize anxiety and destructive responses to stress
* Dealing with the IRS and taxes
* Sensitizing your employer to problems facing your family as a result of the war
* Learning about Arabic culture

## WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO AT MEETINGS?

* Set up a phone network. Swap phone numbers with people that you may wish to call. Assign one person to keep the name and address list for important announcements. Do not release the membership list to anyone.
* Have a good time (have a cake for everyone who has a birthday or special date that month, play baseball, go to a zoo). Don't be shy--ask for a discount on admission.
* Build new friendships.
* Support deployed military (write group letters, take group pictures, record audio and videotapes).
* Plan activities with other groups.

## WHAT CAN WE DO BETWEEN MEETINGS?

* Above all, be there for each other.
* Use the phone network. Call each other between meetings when you feel like it. You may wish to work on projects, talk about good news (such as Big Red having puppies), share concerns, or just chat.
* Serve as a source of information. The group might work closely with a local telephone information and referral source (often called First Call for Help) to keep track of current phone numbers to learn about health status of deployed individuals, how to get mail through, where to find credit counseling, or where to get help with bills.
* Be an advocate. Encourage schools to set up counseling for children. Find and list businesses that give discounts to families of deployed. Work with the military to iron out communication bugs.
* Produce a newsletter. Print a list of programs, local businesses that give discounts to military families, and inspirational ideas.
* Make concrete preparations for the return of the military personnel. Plan a warm welcome program that can include every returning person regardless of when he or she comes back.

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Written by Joal Fischer. A warm thank you goes to the volunteers from family support groups, civilian agencies, and branches of the military who generously gave of their time and energy to edit and encourage. Thanks also go to the NJ Self-Help Clearinghouse for inspiration and permission to reproduce certain ideas.

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## HOW DO WE GET THE WORD OUT?

For small groups, word of mouth is effective. Military leaders and clergy can help you. Be sure to tell your friends to tell their friends.

For large groups, put announcements where the people you want to reach will see or hear them. Think about using community calendars in newspapers and on radio and TV. Post flyers in post offices, churches, supermarkets, community centers, and libraries.

You may wish to consult someone with publicity experience (such as at your local self-help clearinghouse, newspaper, or radio or TV station).

## HOW DO WE ORGANIZE A PUBLIC MEETING?

People coming to this meeting are likely to be apprehensive. A more highly structured format may help them feel more comfortable. Here is one suggestion:

### 1) Preparation

It is often helpful for the leaders of the meeting to get together for a short time to get settled in before the general membership arrives.

### 2) Greeting

Have a person at the front door to:

* Say hello to each person
* Give out name tags
* Ask everyone to sign in (name and phone)

### 3) Formal opening

At the announced time the leader calls the meeting to order. The opening sets the tone for the entire meeting. Some groups open with a greeting, a prayer (such as the serenity prayer), and a listing of the group's purposes and the meeting's activities. Give permission for people to leave early if needed. Remember to emphasize confidentiality: What You Hear Here Stays Here.

### 4) Introductions

Go around the room allowing each member to introduce himself/herself. People may also wish to share the name of (and relationship to) a relative or friend in the military, what brought them to this group, or what they hope to gain from the group.

This is a good time for the leader to emphasize that everyone's anxiety and grief is valid. Set up your group so that it includes everyone on an equal basis. Some family group members may mistakenly "rank" their grief based on one of the following:

* Location of service (how far from the front, in or out of the States)
* Military status (reserve or active duty, deployed or non-deployed)
* Relationship to group member (spouse, sister, brother)
* Health status (healthy, injured, POW/MIA, or deceased)
* Military rank (officer, enlisted)

### 5) Body of meeting

At the first meeting the main topic will be the organization of the group. This is the time for the leader to report on the initial suggestions of the planning committee and open the floor for comments and additional ideas. Be sure to let the members know that this is their group.

At subsequent meetings this time slot can be used for discussion, education, sharing, and programs (such as those listed on page 4). Some groups alternate program meetings with social or informal discussion meetings. Larger groups sometimes break into smaller groups to work on projects, programs, or sharing. Make time available at every meeting for personal sharing, but be sure to avoid the "Pity-Party" trap.

### 6) Planning

This is when you plan future meetings (choosing or announcing discussion topics, guest speakers, and special activities). This section can be very boring; make it brief by being organized. Remind everyone of the time and place of the next meeting.

### 7) Formal closing

At the announced time, the leader gathers the entire group to give a predictable, consistent signal to indicate that the meeting is over. This is when you say good-bye and let everyone know how important they are. Keep it short. Here are some guidelines:

* Do whatever feels comfortable (for example, a big group hug, a prayer, the pledge of allegiance, or a song).
* Leave on an upbeat note.
* Be careful (especially if a prayer is used) to match the wording of the closing to the membership of the group.

### 8) Post-meeting review

This is a chance for the core group or officers to review what went well and what might need to be changed. Keep a log book of the activities of each meeting. Ups and downs in attendance are normal; don't judge success by the number of people present. Be good to yourself.

# WHAT DO WE DO AT A PLANNING MEETING?

Your goal is to launch the group. The first 10 tasks are usually completed before the first public meeting. The last 3 can be done at any time.

## 1) Define the membership

Do you want to have families of military, veterans, anyone affected by the war, or another target group?

Here's a hint: It may seem comforting at first to form a group of similar people (such as wives of men of similar rank in the same branch of service). Indeed, people with very similar backgrounds quickly form bonds of trust and are less likely to find themselves in conflict.

On the other hand, a mixed group gives people a wider variety of perspectives. These differing points of view can help people learn new ways to solve problems.

## 2) Establish general goals for the group

For example, is this intended to be a small group of neighbors sharing feelings? Is it to be a larger group with multiple purposes?

## 3) List some possible activities

Choose some programs and activities which you feel would appeal to new members. Consider bringing these up as suggestions at the first "public" group meeting. Plan ahead. For example, some groups make plans to help returning military feel welcome and to assist families adjust more easily. Some ideas for programs and activities are listed on page 4.

## 4) Set a place and time for the first public meeting

Choose a neutral, private location where people will feel comfortable sharing feelings. Consider a church, school, local Y, or community center (which may be available for free). Avoid places which charge money (such as a restaurant).

## 5) Set a tentative meeting schedule

Consider meeting as often as people feel the need. Some groups meet twice a month alternating social and program meetings. Set an opening and closing time (and stick to it). Keep the formal meeting brief; allow for people to "hang out" afterwards.

## 6) Choose a meeting format

A suggested format for your public meetings is on page 3. It is important to keep the meeting structured. People feel more comfortable when they know what to expect.

## 7) Consider whether or not to have child care

Smaller groups can often recruit a teenager in a family to help. Check with a local youth group or college child development class for volunteers. Be sure your volunteer is qualified (and the location is safe for young children).

## 8) Pick a name for the group

Be sure to reflect the purpose of your group (such as Desert Storm Family Ties). Allow for changes in the composition of the group (such as when military personnel come home).

## 9) Swap names and phone numbers

Your core group is a self-help group itself!

## 10) Distribute the work

Everyone has a talent; distribute tasks (now and later) to help people feel more involved in the success of the group. Here are some jobs to do before the first public meeting:

* Finding a meeting place
* Publicizing the meeting(s)
* Arranging refreshments
* Buying name tags (and a felt tip pen)
* Bringing a pad of paper and pencil for a name and phone list
* Leading the first meeting

Here are some planning activities which can be done now or later:

## 11) Plan programs

Identify local professionals who would be willing to provide programs, facilitate discussions, or consult at your discretion. These people are welcome guests at your meetings. Remember: a self-help group is best run by its members. Support groups run by professionals on a long-term basis are a different type of group.

## 12) Think about coalitions

Consider hooking up other similar support groups to share resources and ideas (sound familiar?). Think about hooking up with a local supportive organization (see page 1).

## 13) Consider money

Family groups can run on pennies. A sponsoring organization may provide space and other resources at no charge. Share the privilege of bringing refreshments or giving each other gifts on birthdays or holidays. Having substantial funds may be more of a burden than a resource.

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# Desert Storm: Hints for Happy Homecomings

**Joal Fischer and Deborah Langsam**

## Why Do I Have Mixed Feelings?

Homecomings bring out all sorts of feelings. Spouses, children, and parents are happy to have their loved ones return. It is usually easy to experience and share this happiness and other "positive" feelings.

However, many people are surprised by the appearance of "negative" feelings that often accompany homecomings. Anger, confusion, and anxiety are normal reactions (which may be more difficult to acknowledge and express).

For example, before the reunion a spouse at home may resent the impending loss of newly gained freedom and independence. Family members may be anxious about whether others will approve of decisions made during the separation.

## Why Isn't Everything Perfect Now That He/She Is Home?

During the war everyone dreams that the return of (or to) loved ones will mark the beginning of a perfect life. However, old family and personal problems tend to reappear and new ones may surface.

Returning military may expect home life to be like it was prior to the war. They may be confused and upset by the changes made in their absence. They may even wonder if they are really needed. The family who stayed at home may have similar feelings.

It takes time for a family to start functioning again as a unit. This can be stressful and may cause conflict. Arguments may be more common; intimacy and sexual relations may be strained.

It is helpful to know that these difficulties are normal and usually pass. It is also helpful to talk openly and keep a sense of humor. This period of renegotiation can be an opportunity for a marriage to grow and become more solid.

## How Long Before We Return To Normal?

The time needed to adjust to being together again varies from family to family. Within several weeks most families have gradually settled into routines. Some of these may be different from those established before the war.

Consider that counseling or therapy may be appropriate for any of the following: 1) unusual depression or anger, 2) self-destructive behaviors (such as drug or alcohol abuse), or 3) an unusually long period of time taken to readjust.

## Can A Support Group Be Helpful Now?

Yes. Support groups give people an opportunity to learn that their "strange" feelings are often normal and are shared by many others.

Support groups also give people a place to share resources and learn new ways to deal with problems (such as unemployment, drug abuse, and domestic violence).

Speaking of support, realize that only those who have been in battle can really understand what it is like to be in the line of fire. Veterans can provide a unique type of support for returning military personnel. Family (especially spouses) need not be upset when they find out that they can't be all things to their loved ones.

## How Do We Say "Thank You?"

Parades are good public ways to let soldiers know that they are appreciated. However, these are one time events and are often planned for those who return first.

Design a welcome program to include all soldiers regardless of when (or from where) they return. Make the program flexible. Some people may be uncomfortable participating in public events or may prefer a more private welcome. Consider giving every soldier a momento (such as a thank you note from a child at a local school).

## One Last Word

Above all, be good to yourselves. You and your loved ones have been under tremendous strain. Give yourselves time to heal.

Written by Joal Fischer and Deborah Langsam. Copyright (1991) by SupportWorks (a non-profit, tax-exempt local organization helping people find, form, and facilitate effective support groups). Feel free to make up to 50 copies of this single sheet for your non-profit group. Please let us know if this publication is helpful. To comment or to place a bulk order, contact SupportWorks, 1012 Kings Drive, Charlotte, NC 28283. 704/331-9500.

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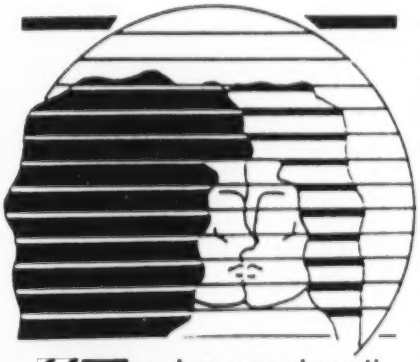
# Self-Help—And How We Teach Tomorrow

**Edward J. Madara**

A RELATIVELY hidden grassroots movement has grown rapidly in America over the last decade. An estimated 15 million Americans are starting or joining self-help mutual aid groups in their communities to help themselves and others better cope with particular stresses of modern living.

While most people know of Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935, few are aware of the hundreds of other groups that have developed for a wide variety of other addictions, disabilities, parenting, and other family problems.

These member-run groups include those for new parents, single parents, and step-parents; for parents of twins, of adolescents, and of the handicapped; Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Debtors Anonymous; Alateen, Gamateen, and children of divorced parents; for burn victims, drunken-driver accident victims, and incest victims; for persons with herpes, epilepsy, and juvenile arthritis; and Speak Easy for stutterers. Tough Love and Families Anonymous for parents troubled by teenage behavior.



"The decreased availability of traditional supports such as the extended family, neighborhood, church, etc., has made it necessary for people to look to new sources of support."

Parents Anonymous, for parents who fear they may be emotionally or physically abusing their children, has grown in one decade to 1,500 chapters, each meeting weekly. Last year Parents Anonymous started an additional 100 new groups just for children who are or have been abused.

### Self-Help Group Likenesses

There are four characteristics common to all self-help groups in that they are–

- **Peer oriented**–composed of people who share a common problem or stressful life situation.
- **Mutual-aid directed**–sharing experiences and support one to another.
- **Member-run**–therefore more responsive to members' needs. About one-third of the groups were developed with the help of professionals who recognized the value of their being "on tap not on top."
- **Voluntary nonprofit**–charging no fees for service and only minimal dues if any.

### What Does a Self-Help Group Do?

Groups serve at least three functions and in some cases a fourth.

They provide–

- **Support**–the comfort of knowing that "you are not alone" and help from others who "have been there."
- **Information**–the pooling of information and resources by members for members.
- **Education and skill development**–learning from other members' practical experiences and successes and from professional speakers whom some groups are able to attract without cost.
- **Advocacy** (optional and not conducted by all groups)–working for needed changes in society (where problems exist) more so than in themselves.

An important dynamic found in all self-help groups is "helper therapy." Early research on student tutoring programs describes the unique benefits the helper receives in giving help to another, e.g. clarifying one's own problem-solving methods and having a better sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

### Why Self-Help Groups Developed?

The decreased availability of traditional supports such as the extended family, neighborhood, church, etc., has made it necessary for people to look to new sources of support. Self-help groups as support systems have been compared to extended families in that they provide a caring community and help often available 24 hours a day without forms, fees, or appointments.

Self-help groups offer unique benefits not available elsewhere. They are more accessible, found in local communities, and offer help without cost and with anonymity if one chooses. By providing peer support, normalization, positive role models, and a more active sense of empowerment and control, they help in ways that traditional social services cannot.

Often appropriate professional support services specializing in the problem are not available or helpful.

### Self-Help Clearinghouse Nationwide

Below is a list of clearinghouses provided by the author. In addition, there is a national clearinghouse–National Self-Help Clearinghouse, 33 West 42nd Street, Room 1227, New York, NY 10036; telephone 212-840-1259. Also, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Public Health Service, Alcohol-Drug Abuse-Mental Health Administration, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857) has published a leaflet (No. ADM81-1138) "Plain Talk About Mutual Help Groups."

CALIFORNIA, San Diego 619-275-2344
CALIFORNIA, San Francisco 415-921-4401
CALIFORNIA, Los Angeles 213-825-5333
CONNECTICUT, New Haven 203-789-7645
FLORIDA, Hillsborough 813-974-4672
ILLINOIS, Evanston 312-328-0470
MICHIGAN, Berrien Co. 616-983-7781
MINNESOTA, St. Paul 612-642-4060
NEBRASKA, 402-476-9668
NEW JERSEY, Denville 800-367-6274
NEW YORK, Long Island 516-499-8800
NEW YORK, New York City 212-852-4290
NEW YORK, Westchester Co. 914-347-3620
OREGON, Portland 503-222-5555
PENNSYLVANIA, Philadelphia 215-568-0860
PENNSYLVANIA, Scranton 717-961-1234
TEXAS, Dallas Co. 214-748-7825
WASHINGTON, D.C. 703-536-4100
WISCONSIN, 414-461-1466

### Self-Help—A Long-Term Trend

Alvin Toffler, in *The Third Wave*, called the self-help group phenomena a new American ethos and he coined the word "prosumer" to describe the trend and its members. In the recent bestseller, *Megatrends*, author John Naisbitt highlights self-help as a "new direction transforming our lives."

The number of groups for parents of handicapped children or the chronically ill are increasing. The birth-rate of children with mental and physical problems has doubled in the last 25 years. An increase in the number of groups for families caring for an elderly relative reflects the increasing difficulties smaller families face as more adults work and a greater portion of the population lives longer.

The self-help trend is encouraging, for an increasing amount of medical research, often overlooked in health promotion, indicates that people with supportive relationships tend to live longer and healthier lives.

### Tapping Self-Help Resources

Teachers can promote an increased awareness and understanding of self-help groups by–

- Integrating information on self-help mutual aid group dynamics and opportunities into home economics and family life education curricula.
- Inviting representatives of self-help groups to speak, e.g. during drug and alcohol awareness weeks.
- Encouraging and helping students to form self-help groups of their own.
- Referring students and families to self-help groups.
- Identifying and contacting local self-help clearinghouses for more information, directories, and training.

While self-help groups are not a panacea to solving all problems, they are an important new resource for helping people help themselves and others through specific life problems and transitions.

*Edward J. Madara founded in 1981 and directs the first computerized statewide self-help clearinghouse in the nation–New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse, St. Clare's Hospital Community Mental Health Center, Denville, New Jersey.*
*Madara has developed and led training workshops on suicide prevention, single parenthood, widowhood, intergenerational communication, and effective parenting. He is a Fordham University graduate in sociology and earned his master's degree at the University of Missouri.*

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# When Someone's Away

## An Ongoing Support Group for Students in Grades 7–12 with Deployed Parents and Friends

**Marlene L. Bowling, Carolyn S. Donges and Barbara Stock Nielsen**

### Introduction

During the current Middle East crisis situation, some students may experience increased anxiety, fear, stress and depression. It is important to recognize that these behaviors are indeed directly related to the crisis situation. At this time, students have a real need for understanding and support. Also, students need to be given permission to express their feelings during this difficult time.

This activity booklet has been developed to use with students in grades 7–12 who have family members and/or close friends deployed in the Middle East. Suggestions for working with students are included as well as activities for principals, classroom teachers and guidance counselors. Specific suggestions on forming a support group and eight group sessions which can be conducted by school counselors are included.

### Suggestions for Working With Students During the Middle East Crisis

#### Activities for School Principals

Students may experience increased anxieties and fear. These feelings may be expressed in behaviors such as:

- short attention span
- increased activity levels
- tendency toward "acting out" behaviors
- difficulty in concentrating
- easily distracted
- irritability, decreased productivity with class work and homework

It is important to recognize that these behaviors indicate that students need understanding and support rather than disciplinary interventions.

1. Principals should meet with the entire faculty to focus on the crisis in the Middle East. Let teachers share their feelings about the crisis.
2. The principal can divide the faculty into groups and ask them to share the following with group members:

- Where were you when you heard the news that war had begun?
- How did you feel?
- What has been the hardest part of this crisis for you?
- What has been the most encouraging part of this crisis for you?

3. Allow time for group members to share and then have one person from each group share his or her group's discussion with the entire faculty.
4. Encourage teachers to observe more closely those students who are already at-risk since they may be more susceptible to stress.
5. Encourage faculty and staff to help students, especially younger students, understand that they personally are not endangered by this war. Let them share facts about where the war is occurring.
6. Encourage faculty and staff to identify students who may need to be members of a support group that guidance counselors are forming in the school and refer them to counselors.

## Activities for Classroom Teachers

### General Guidelines

1. Encourage the student to talk to you about how he or she is feeling. Remind the students that their feelings are normal.
2. Don't assume that young men handle this kind of crisis better than young women.
3. Do not attempt to reassure the student that everything will be ok. Everything is not ok.
4. Do not attempt to impose your explanation on why this has happened to the student.
5. Do not tell the student that you know how she or he feels. You don't. Often such attempts are really aimed at relieving your own anxiety about how you feel about what has happened to the student.
6. Encourage students to share their feelings with their family.
7. Teachers may want to report any unusual behaviors that might be interfering with the students' daily routine.
8. Don't be afraid to encourage a student to ask for help such as counseling or a support group. And don't be afraid to ask for help yourself.
9. Try not to project your own feelings on those around you. Each student experiences crisis and its consequences differently. Be understanding of the pace at which each student copes and heals.
10. Don't be afraid to ask how someone is doing. Teachers do not have to ask for details of the crisis. If the student wants to talk, listen. The best thing to do is to let the student know that you are there and that you care. It is not necessary to try to make things better.

### Classroom Activities

1. Have students discuss reactions to the conflict in the Middle East. Divide the class into small groups of six and share reactions with group members.
2. Have students write about their own experiences such as:

   - Where were you when you heard war had begun?
   - What has been the hardest part of this crisis for you?
   - What has been the most encouraging part for you?
   - What does peace mean to you?
   - What would you say if you could write Saddam Hussein a letter?

3. Have class discussions around the issues in the Middle East and possible solutions.
4. Have students brainstorm their own plans for resolution of the conflict as well as resolution of their own stress.
5. Encourage students to develop projects that show support for our troops in the Middle East, such as:

   - Writing letters to government officials and/or service personnel in the Persian Gulf region.
   - Having the class come up with things they can do to help families in their community/ school who have family members in the

Middle East, i.e., sending cards, volunteering time for helping with household maintenance or babysitting, providing transportation, cooking a meal or helping with a meal.

6. Integrate the Middle East crisis issue into academics at times. For instance, in English, essays or short stories may be written about one of the issues involved in the crisis. In science or math students could discuss missile and target trajectory, mapping skills, differences between chemical or biological warfare and treatment.
7. Remain sensitive to the fact that some students have family members directly involved in conflict in the Middle East. Show special understanding and concern for their needs at this time and keep an optimistic outlook. It will benefit your students and their performance.
8. Refer students who have family members or close friends in the Middle East to the guidance counselor to become members of a support group.

## Starting a Support Group

At this time of crisis in the Middle East, it is important that students express and share their feelings about the crisis. To help facilitate this, many counselors are beginning or have already begun to form support groups for students who have family members or close friends involved in the crisis in the Middle East. Also, individual conferencing can occur as follow-up to the small group sessions.

The following are some suggestions for starting a support group in schools:

1. Counselors should share with faculty and staff the importance of starting support groups in their school.
2. Classroom teachers should tell students that the counselors will be starting support groups in the school.
3. Students wanting to be a part of the support groups should write their name and the relationship of the family or friend deployed in the Middle East on a piece of paper. Counselors may want to prepare a form to give out to classroom teachers that students could complete.
4. The names of students should be forwarded to the guidance counselor who would then determine how many students were interested in the support groups.
5. The guidance counselor should contact students to let them know about the time and place of the support group meetings.
6. Counselors should communicate to the faculty and staff the meeting times and place of the support groups.
7. The school should make parental contact to inform parents/guardians about the support groups and ask parents to encourage their child's participation.
8. The support groups should meet with the counselor once a week during the school day to give ongoing support to all students involved.

## Support Group Sessions for Guidance Counselors

### To the Counselor

1. Each session is designed with the following objectives:
   - The student will be able to identify and express feelings about deployed parents/friends involved in the Persian Gulf.
   - The student will be able to identify and express the significant losses experienced by a person having a deployed parent/friend.
   - The student will be able to identify and learn to practice coping skills which relieve separation anxiety.
   - The student will be able to identify the ways one can grow through a crisis situation.
2. The questions in each session are structured with the underlying premise that students are involved in experiencing the grief process.

**Stage and Behavior Exhibited**

Shock and Denial:

- unable to concentrate
- preoccupied

Fear and Anxiety:

- afraid of being safe
- worries over insignificant things

Anger and Guilt:

- anger at parents being away
- anger at changes in the home
- guilt over having angry feelings at parent (especially if occurred *before* parent left)

Sadness and Depression:

- feels sad and lonely over losses
- feels helpless to do anything about the losses

Acceptance:

- able to cope
- able to concentrate
- feels hopeful

3. While the questions in each session are structured to move students to deeper levels of sharing, the counselor may feel free to spend several sessions on one set of questions.

## First Session

### General Guidelines

1. The counselor should start the session by stating the purpose of the support group. The purpose of the group is for students to have a specific time and place set aside to share their feelings and concerns about the events taking place in the Middle East. Once these feelings are shared, the students will be better able to go back into the classroom and focus on their school work.
2. The counselor should stress the importance of confidentiality.
3. If any student has a particular concern that they do not wish to share in the group, they may request an individual counseling session.
4. The counselor should express the importance of everyone sharing in the group.
5. In order to be heard, only one person may talk at a time.
6. The counselor may begin the session by going around the group and having students introduce themselves.
7. Each student should give the name of the relative or friend they have in Saudi Arabia and the relationship they have with that person. If they know their military job, share this also.
8. Each student can share the reason they wanted to be in a support group.
9. The counselor may close the session by summarizing the students' feelings. Each session should end on a positive note with positive things shared about the session.
10. Counselors should encourage students to bring news, pictures, letters, poems or anything personal they would like to share with the group about their loved one. The counselor can start off each session with a sharing time. Some students may hear from their loved ones more often than others, depending on the various jobs they do. It is not necessary for students to bring something to share each time.

### Session Questions

1. When did your family member or friend go to Saudi Arabia and how did you hear the news that they were going?
2. What were your feelings as they were telling you this news?
3. As you heard the news of their leaving, what did they say or do that scared or frightened you about the situation?
4. What did they say or do that reassured you or made you feel better about the situation?

## Second Session

### General Guidelines

1. If new students are present, the counselor may need to have everyone introduce themselves again and tell the relationship of friend or relative in the Middle East.
2. At the beginning of each session, the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.
3. Counselor ends with a summary of feelings as positive, encouraging remarks.

### Session Questions

1. Where were you and what were you doing when you first heard the news that the war had started?
2. How did your family members react when they heard the news?
3. What was the first thing you thought about when you realized there actually was fighting?
4. What scares you the most about this war?
5. What do you do when thinking about the war becomes scary?
6. What is the most encouraging part about all of this?
7. If you could have one wish right now what would that be?
8. What can we do in this group to make each other feel better? (Speak and smile at each other in hall and classroom, give peace sign, make yellow ribbons or some mementos to wear as group members.)

## Third Session

### General Guidelines

1. Counselor might want to suggest that students bring a poem, story or song that gives them comfort or makes them feel good during this time of crisis.
2. At the beginning of each session the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.

### Session Questions

1. How has the crisis in the gulf changed your family, friends etc.?
2. How do you feel about these changes?
3. Have your duties and chores changed at home since your relative was deployed?
4. What is one change you don t like? What is one change that you do like?
5. How has the crisis is the Persian Gulf changed you?
6. How do you feel about being at school with a war going on?
7. Do you feel safe being in the United States?
8. What are some things you can do or think about to make yourself feel safe?

## Fourth Session

### General Guidelines

1. Display a map of the world. Have students draw a line showing how far It is from home to Saudi Arabia. Remind them that this is also the way back home.
2. At the beginning of each session the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.

### Session Questions

1. How is having a military job different from having a regular job?
2. How do you feel about the military now that we have gone to war? President Bush? Saddam Hussein?
3. How does it make you feel when you hear that some people do not support the war?
4. What would you like to say to those people?
5. How do you feel about your relative or parent being away so long?
6. Do you ever feel angry toward your relative or friend for not being here when you need them?
7. What do you do to help yourself when you are angry about the war? (Brainstorm with kids constructive ways to express their anger.)

## Fifth Session

### General Guidelines

1. Suggest making a notebook of things.to remember that they can share with friend or relative on their return.

2. At the beginning of each session the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.

### Session Questions

1. In what ways do you feel differently about your relative or friend since they left for Saudi Arabia?
2. If you could change something that you said or did before your relative or friend left, what would that be?
3. If you could say one thing to your relative or friend about how you feel about them, what would you say?
4. How do you think they would feel about what you said?
5. If you cannot reach your friend or relative to share this information what can you think about or remember to make you feel better until you can.
6. Think about a special time you shared with your parent or relative. Share this with the group.
7. What are some other ways you can express your love for this person?

## Sixth Session

### General Guidelines

1. Make a calendar to show how long your parent or friend might he gone.
2. At the beginning of each session the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.

### Session Questions

1. How do you feel when you hear on TV that Americans are dying in the war?
2. What would it be like for you if your relative or friend is killed?
3. If your relative or friend is killed you would probably be sad, what do you do when you are sad?
4. How can you tell when people around you are sad?
5. How would life change for you if your relative or friend was killed?
6. If your friend or relative died in the war, what are some things that you would need to do to keep going in life?
7. What would you need for this group to do for you if you lost someone in the war?

## Seventh Session

### General Guidelines

1. Students may want to bring a record or song to play that makes them feel peaceful during this time of crisis.
2. At the beginning of each session the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.

### Session Questions

1. What do you love the most about your relative or friend who is deployed?
2. What do you do when you are at home alone and feel really sad and depressed? What helps when you feel this way?
3. Who is someone you can call or write to when you feel this way?
4. How has this crisis made things difficult for your family?
5. In what ways are we closer because of this crisis?
6. How has this crisis made you a stronger person?

## Eighth Session

### General Guidelines

1. Keep a notebook or scrapbook of events or things that have happened to you while your relative is away. You can share these when they return.

2. At the beginning of each session the counselor should allow time for students to share any new event that has happened since the last session took place.

### Session Questions

1. What are some of the good things that are happening in the world as a result of this crisis?
2. Share one good thing that has happened in your family since the crisis.
3. Share how this experience is making you grow.
4. How has this experience in the group caused you to grow?
5. If there is one thing you could say that has surprised you about this group, what would that be?

## Resources

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Ragonzeos, B. (1987). *The grieving student in the classroom* (Guidelines and suggestions for classroom teachers and school personnel of grades K–12). Hospice of Lancaster County.

Robinson, E. H., Rotter, J. D., Fey, M. A., & Vogel, K. R. (1990). *Coping with fears and stress* (An activity guide for grades K-8). Distributed by South Carolina Department of Education.

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